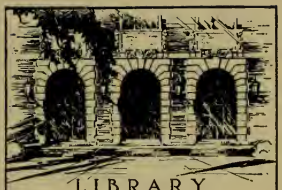

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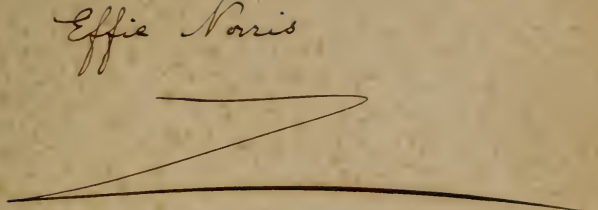
Effie Norris

# MY FRIEND JIM

VOL. I.

# MY FRIEND JIM

BY

W. E. NORRIS

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

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ERRATA.

Page 53, Vol. I., line 1, *for* "viscounts" *read* "earls."
Page 72, Vol. I., line 8, *for* "a viscount" *read* "an earl."
,, ,, line 9, *for* "an earl" *read* "a marquis."
Page 160, Vol. I., line 3, *for* "earl" *read* "marquis."
Page 53, Vol. II., line 11, *for* "earl" *read* "marquis."
Page 206, Vol. II., line 67, *for* "viscountess" *read* "countess."

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# MY FRIEND JIM.

## CHAPTER I.

I REMEMBER it all as clearly as if it had happened yesterday afternoon. It is one of those little scenes which, without being specially significant or suggestive, manage somehow or other to imprint themselves upon the memory, and which remain there while so many hundreds of others fade away and vanish, as the years go on. When I closed my eyes for a moment just now

the whole thing came back to me—the dark, musty-smelling study, with one broad sunbeam stretching right across it from the window; Bracknell, Jim, and I standing close together beside the high, empty fire-place; old Lord Staines, looking uncommonly smart and spruce (as he always did in those days), a flower in his buttonhole, and a smile of serene beatitude on his handsome face; and my tutor blinking through his spectacles and addressing himself, after his customary fashion, to no one in particular.

"I shall be sorry to lose these three fellows," says he. "They aren't bad fellows, you know, taking them all round, and I fancy they will succeed as well in the world as they have succeeded

at Eton. Yes, just about as well. Bracknell—well, I don't see what more could have been asked of Bracknell than that he should get into the eleven, and avoid getting into any serious scrapes. He is good-looking, he is good-natured, and from time to time I have even observed gleams of—er—intelligence in him. Bracknell will do; he will adorn his station. Well, then, Maynard. Maynard is clever, if not quite so clever as he thinks himself. I hardly expect him to set the Thames on fire; but I hope his mother will never have reason to be ashamed of him, and I have written to her, telling her that I consider him my show pupil. More than I ought to have said, perhaps, but there's no fear of her

disbelieving me. As for Leigh (here my tutor took a few steps forward and patted Jim on the shoulder), what is to be said about you, Leigh? In classics you are but moderate; in mathematics I understand that you are also moderate; you're not in the eleven; you're not in the eight; I doubt very much whether you would be in the boats at all if you hadn't so many friends. In short, Leigh, you are mediocre. But you're the best fellow of the lot, all the same. And, that being so," added my tutor, looking up with a queer, kindly smile at the young giant who towered nearly a head and shoulders above him "I should be inclined to prophesy, Leigh, that you will always have plenty of friends, and that you will possibly be—

er—more or less imposed upon all your life long."

Lord Staines broke out into laughter at this rather cynical prediction. "We'll look after him," said he; "we'll see that you aren't imposed upon, Leigh."

And I dare say he thought himself quite capable of so doing, although his own career might not have recommended him to an impartial person as being the fittest man in the world to undertake that task. He had always taken a good-humoured and somewhat patronising interest in Jim, whose father and mother were both dead, whose small property adjoined his more extensive one in Berkshire, and who—above all—was his boy's friend. He thought very well of the lad, and indeed was kind enough

to say as much there and then. As for Jim's being "the best of the lot," that of course was only a joke. It is not in the least likely that Lord Staines would have been angry with any one who should have seriously declared Jim to be Bracknell's superior. When one is fortunate enough to be the owner of a Derby winner one is not quite so silly as to lose one's temper with a man for proclaiming his own steady, useful roadster to be the more valuable animal of the two.

Poor old Lord Staines was a fond and foolish father, no doubt. I have heard him so described with such wearisome frequency that I should very much like to contradict the statement if I could. That being impossible, I will only venture

to assert that there were excuses for him. Everything leads me to believe that if I had a son as handsome, as muscular, as recklessly brave and jolly, and devil-may-care as Bracknell was in those days, I should be proud of him. These attributes may or may not constitute a legitimate cause for parental pride ; but I suppose it will hardly be denied that they usually excite it. At the same time, it must be admitted that Lord Staines was a little bit outrageous in his crowing and chuckling, and one can't wonder that some of his friends laughed at him, while others found him rather a bore. Whenever there was a cricket match on he would collect as many cronies as he could induce to accompany him, and would drag them down to Eton to watch

his boy bowling and slogging. He himself never wearied of this delightful spectacle, and could not understand that it might eventually pall upon others. He kept Bracknell supplied with plenty of pocket money, laughing good-humouredly at the rapidity with which it was spent. I don't suppose that he even minded much when certain longish bills were sent in to him by the Windsor and Eton tradesmen, some of whom respectfully intimated that they had not been paid for three years. He, too, had always been open-handed, careless and extravagant ; probably he thought it only natural that his son and heir should resemble him, and if by any chance he ever considered the effect of two generations of extravagance upon a not very magnificent

rent-roll, he doubtless said to himself that some day Bracknell would marry a woman with money, and that then it would be all right. Such was the course which he had adopted, and it had answered admirably. That is to say that he had not, at the time of which I am speaking, yet reached the last shilling of his late wife's fortune.

He was, at any rate, evidently free from misgivings on that last day of Bracknell's Eton life ; for he was literally brimming over with contentment and goodwill. He shook hands with us warmly when the time came for us to wish him good-bye, repeating to us both again and again that, although our friend's path in life would no longer be the same as our own (for Bracknell was to join

the 4th Life Guards immediately, while Jim and I were to proceed in due course to Oxford), yet we were on no account to imagine that our friendship was at an end.

"We shall all meet at Staines Court before long. Well, perhaps not next autumn, because I shall be in Scotland until rather late in the year; but some time, you know—some time. And Bracknell will run down to Oxford and look you up. Or why not join us in the north, both of you? Are you fond of stalking? Never tried it? Well, well, everything must have a beginning. Bracknell is as fine a shot for his years as I ever saw. Now mind, we shall count upon seeing you. Good-bye, my dear fellows, good-bye."

Then he hurried off to Goodwood, taking Bracknell with him, and, I should think, forgot our existence with very great celerity.

I remember that, after we had seen the last of them, Jim said, with a sigh, "What a splendid fellow he is!" and was quite angry with me for pretending to think that he alluded to old Staines. I never shared Jim's enthusiastic admiration for Bracknell; but then I am not of an enthusiastic temperament, and have a quick eye (so, at least, I am assured) for any blemishes that may disfigure the characters of my friends. At all events, I thought I had discovered some blemishes in Bracknell's character, and that selfishness was one of them and fickleness another. My impression certainly was

that he would trouble himself very little more about us from the moment that circumstances ceased to throw us together; and I have much pleasure in admitting that therein I did him an injustice. We did not, of course, take advantage of that somewhat vague invitation to become Lord Staines's guests in the Highlands; but a few months later Bracknell redeemed his father's promise that he should look us up at Oxford, and, falling in with many other old Etonians there, had such a gay and uproarious time of it that he was easily persuaded to repeat his visit at an early date. Indeed, during the following two years, he used to make periodical descents upon Christ Church, where a band of choice spirits was ever ready to welcome him, and where his arrival was

invariably the signal for a bear-fight upon an unusually extensive scale. On the ensuing day Bracknell would return to London, leaving poor Jim to face the college authorities, who, however, generally let him off easily. I fancy they knew pretty well that he was sure, under all circumstances, to be made the scapegoat; moreover, it really was not in human nature—no, not even in donnish nature—to be hard upon Jim Leigh.

Every now and again Jim would get leave to go up to London for a day, whence he would return a little pale and fagged, but quite delighted with the hospitality of the officers of the 4th Life Guards, whose existence, according to his account, would appear to have been a merry one. I can't speak of it from

personal knowledge. Bracknell never asked me to visit him in London ; nor did I participate in the bear-fights to which allusion has been made. For one thing, I was a reading man, and for another, I couldn't have ventured to run the risk of being rusticated and breaking my mother's heart. Jim, as I have mentioned before, was an orphan, and the worst that could have happened to him would have been no such serious matter in his case.

On attaining the age of one-and-twenty he was duly placed in possession of his estate, together with personal property which, I believe, made his income up to something over five thousand a year ; so that he was in all senses of the word independent. At his request, however,

his uncle and aunt who had resided at Elmhurst throughout his long minority, consented to remain there until he should marry; an event which I had reason to think might not be very remote. But this was a profound secret. Jim had let me into it because from our earliest boyhood he had had no secrets from me; but to not another soul had he spoken of his hopes—least of all to the lady who was the object of them.

I should be very glad to be able to write of Hilda Turner with perfect impartiality; for were that in my power I should probably convey a far better idea of her to the reader, who if he had met her in the flesh would doubtless have been fascinated by her, as most people were, and might even have fallen in love with

her, as a great many did. But the simple truth is that I never could endure the girl ; and so my evidence must be taken for whatever that of a prejudiced witness may be worth. I have, at any rate, no hesitation in allowing that she was extremely pretty, although her beauty was not of a regular order, and that her manners were charming, although they did not happen to charm me. She was one of those very fair people whose complexions are of the clearest white, the bloom upon whose cheeks is of the most delicate and exquisite pink, and who seldom become wrinkled before they reach extreme old age. I am told that these enviable peculiarities are due to thickness of the epidermis, and I have sometimes fancied that persons so gifted are apt

also to be endued with a certain mental toughness of hide which may perhaps be of some assistance in preserving the smoothness of their brows. But I don't insist upon that point. Hilda had golden hair and blue eyes, and if everybody had teeth like hers the dentists would be driven to find another occupation. To be sure when you began to criticise there were plenty of faults to be found with her face. Her nose, for instance, was too short, her jaw was too square, and her lips were a trifle too thin. I remember once pointing out these defects to my mother, who shook her head, and said that if I expected perfection I should have some difficulty in finding a wife. Certain it is that I am unmarried still (though not, I think, on account of the

cause assigned), but I am very sure that my mother would have chosen that I should remain a bachelor to my dying day rather than that I should fall in love with Hilda Turner.

I suppose that never since the world began did there live quite so poor a judge of character as my dear mother. Partly from having seen very little of the bad side of human nature—for she has been a confirmed invalid, unable to put a foot to the ground, almost from the time of my birth—partly from her unquestioning faith in the wisdom and mercy of an overruling Providence, which causes her to take an optimistic view of everything, her own constant sufferings included; partly, too, from the natural sweetness of her disposition, which renders

her, I do believe, incapable of conceiving that any one can be intentionally wicked, she habitually regards others as she wishes them to be, and by no means as they actually are. Yet I recollect that upon one occasion she gave me to understand, with a good deal of circumlocution and hesitation, that she feared Hilda Turner was not an entirely straightforward girl. What her grounds were for formulating this tremendously severe charge I could not induce her to divulge; but I suspect that she had caught the young lady in an unequivocal fib. I could have told her that that was no uncommon occurrence, but I never did tell her such things when I could help it, because the only effect of my doing so was to give her unnecessary pain.

If she had some misgiving about Hilda, she had none at all about Hilda's father, the rector of the parish, of whom she always spoke as "good Mr. Turner." Good Mr. Turner was—not to mince matters—an ass. There was no harm in him. He pottered about the parish, did a little work, preached us a sermon once a week, which had at least the merit of brevity, and was benevolent in a passive sort of way. Hilda ruled him—I won't say with a rod of iron, for no such formidable weapon could possibly have been required for so gentle a creature; but at any rate she ruled him absolutely.

Our neighbourhood not being a very thickly inhabited one, the few families who lived within a mile or two of each other were naturally intimate. Hilda and

Jim and I had grown up from childhood together as companions, and when the Henleys were at Staines Court we also saw a good deal of Bracknell and his sister. However, after Lady Staines's death, the great house was generally empty. Lord Staines was always in London or in Scotland, or at Newmarket, or at some other of the resorts where he spent his money so freely, and it was only at rare intervals that quiet little Lady Mildred would come down for a week or so, attended by her governess and accompanied by one of the aunts who looked after her. She was a demure little mouse of a thing, with bright brown eyes, which saw a good deal more than was commonly supposed, and as kind a heart as ever beat; but as she was rather shy, and had

a way of keeping her opinions to herself, nobody noticed her much. She and Hilda were by way of being friends, although it is scarcely possible that there can have been any real sympathy between them, and when Hilda was in her nineteenth year, Mildred's aunt, Lady Petworth, very good-naturedly invited the rector's daughter to spend a season with her in London, and presented her at Court.

"I rejoice," Mr. Turner used to say, in his placid, deliberate way, "that dear Hilda has kept up her friendship with Lady Mildred. I have encouraged it (I dare say he really thought that his encouragement might be a factor in the question), both because refined companionship cannot but be beneficial to the young, and because I feel that it is

desirable that she should see something of—well, of the best society of the day."

Doubtless Hilda also felt the latter result of her intercourse with Lady Mildred to be highly desirable. As for the refined companionship, I dare say she might have made shift to do without that at a pinch.

I can't tell whether it was after Miss Turner's introduction to the "best society of the day" that Jim first discovered how desperately he was in love with her; but it was about that time that—to my sorrow, though not to my surprise—he made me acquainted with the state of his feelings. It was not, however, until more than a year later, when we had both bidden farewell to Oxford, that matters approached a crisis. Up to then Jim's

attentions had been of a most modest and tentative order. He had a poor opinion of his personal charms, and preferred the agony of suspense to the risk of rejection. I am afraid I must plead guilty to having encouraged his diffidence. To confess the truth, I thought it was upon the cards that so captivating a young lady as Miss Turner might chance upon somebody in London whose claims to her regard might be greater than poor Jim's. But such did not prove to be the case. Five thousand a year is not a colossal income, yet, if you will take the trouble to run over the list of your acquaintances, you will find that the bachelors who possess as much are in a small minority ; and it seems possible that Hilda may have made that calculation.

And so, one fine hot month of July, when Cranfield Rectory, embosomed among its spreading trees, looked the very spot for the enacting of a pastoral idyll; when the great level lawns at Staines Court were gay with flowers, which there was nobody but the gardeners to admire, and when our own humble domain was, as my mother, who took immense pride in it declared, "quite a show," it came to pass that two young people were constantly to be seen, riding or walking together among the lanes and woods, of whom it might be said that they formed a very handsome couple. Not that our big-boned, broad-shouldered Jim, with his hook nose, his quiet grey eyes, and that large mouth of his, which, upon the smallest provocation, would widen

itself into a smile extending from ear to ear, was strictly speaking a handsome man, but perhaps he was near enough being so to justify the above good-natured description, which was uttered by many persons, the Reverend Simeon Turner included. The Reverend Simeon was not ambitious. A son-in-law with five thousand a year, a high moral character, and a malleable disposition was good enough for him.

I was then about to be called to the Bar, and was busy reading law, a study which I thought at the time, and think still, to be among the most repulsive that a moderately intelligent human being can bring his mind to bear upon. One afternoon, while I was sitting with somebody's *Common Law Procedure*, and I forget

whose *Precedents of Pleadings* open before me, Jim lounged into my den, and, seating himself sideways upon the table, remarked that he was the happiest fellow in Christendom or something to that effect.

When you know that your friend is absolutely bent upon making a fool of himself the very stupidest thing in the world is to tell him so. I endeavoured to look delighted and said, "Has she accepted you, then?"

"Well, no," he answered; "she hasn't exactly accepted me, for the reason that I haven't asked her; but I think it will be all right. Harry, old chap, I don't know what I have done to deserve such luck!"

Nor did I. I am quite sure that he had never done anything to deserve it; but the thing had come upon him

nevertheless; and, after all, one sees many prisoners who hug their chains contentedly. "And why," I inquired, "haven't you proposed to her?"

Jim laughed. "I'm such a duffer!" he replied. "It takes me a long time to get under way, and when I am coming to the point she always manages somehow or other to put me off. Well, it doesn't much matter; there's no hurry, you know."

"None whatever," I agreed, thinking to myself that, so long as the fatal words remained unspoken, there was always just the ghost of a hope left for him.

And then he threw himself into my armchair, lighted a cigar, and began to rhapsodise after a fashion which it would be as tedious to write about as to read.

## CHAPTER II.

It was at this somewhat critical juncture that Lord Staines took it into his head to come down to Staines Court, with the avowed intention of remaining there for a considerable time. His arrival, which had been preceded by that of his French cook, his house-steward, his groom of the chambers, and heaven only knows how many other domestic functionaries (for his style of living had always been far in excess of that warranted by his income), caused quite a little stir in the

vicinity, and set everybody conjecturing as to its causes. What these were was revealed to us the next morning by Lady Mildred, who lost no time in walking over to see my mother.

"Papa has been very unlucky this year," she said, in her gentle, matter-of-course way. "First of all, his horse lost the Derby by a head, as you know——"

"My dear," interrupted my mother, "I am afraid I know nothing about the Derby, except that it is a race which takes place every spring."

"No, you wouldn't. But papa knows a great deal about it, and even I know something. Premier must have won if he had not been interfered with. It was nobody's fault, but it was poor papa's misfortune; and since then he has been

unlucky at Ascot also. So there is to be no yachting this summer, and we are going to remain here quietly and ask hardly anybody to stay with us."

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good," remarked my mother; "it will be a great pleasure to the young people to have you near them. And, perhaps," she added meditatively, "these losses may prove a blessing in disguise to Lord Staines if they induce him to leave off betting on horse-races, which I cannot think right. Because, you see, if one man wins money others must lose it."

Lady Mildred admitted that that was probably the case, but doubted whether the losers were often prevailed upon to give up the game. "As for me," she said, "I would always rather be at

Staines Court than anywhere else; and Bracknell is coming down in a few days, so that it will be quite like old times again. But I am afraid he will find it too dull to stay long."

"Oh, but he will have plenty of companions," said my mother, in the innocence of her heart. "There is Harry, you know, and Jim Leigh, and Hilda Turner."

Lying there upon her sofa year after year, day following day, with no change or the possibility of it, it was difficult for her to realise how quickly boys and girls become men and women. The boy, it is said, is father to the man, and one must assume, by parity of reasoning, that the girl is mother to the woman. The theory is a somewhat discouraging

one, when considered, but I am bound to confess that my own observation tends to confirm it. When my tutor predicted that Bracknell would adorn his station, I take it that he spoke with a spice of that good-humoured malice in which he sometimes permitted himself to indulge. Bracknell at the age of twenty-three was probably very much what my tutor had anticipated that he would be. He was one of the handsomest young men about London; he was immensely in request with that class who have come to be known in these latter days as the "smart people"; his *affaires de cœur* had been numerous and a trifle ostentatious; he was owner, or part owner, of several horses which had achieved a certain celebrity; and he was pretty deeply in

debt. I should be puzzled to say what good qualities he possessed beyond that of pluck, but I do not in the least wonder at his great popularity. Jim, who persisted in regarding him as a bright particular star, was overjoyed on hearing that he proposed to honour our quiet neighbourhood with his presence for a time, and it struck me that Hilda's eyes glistened when this cheering intelligence was conveyed to her.

We all—that is, the Turners, Jim, and myself — were invited to dine at Staines Court on the evening of his arrival; and I declare that we had not been seated at the table for five minutes before it was perfectly clear to me that Miss Hilda intended to make him her captive. What put this beyond a doubt

was the obstinacy with which she declined to have anything to say to him. Lord Staines, who took her in to dinner, was obviously depressed and preoccupied when we sat down; but Hilda put forth all her very considerable powers of pleasing, and by the time that the fish was removed she had contrived to put her neighbour in the best of good spirits. No man was more truly appreciative of feminine beauty and wit than Lord Staines. Meanwhile, Bracknell, who had old Turner on his right hand, speedily realised that he had a very charming person on his left; and it was not a little amusing to see the look of blank astonishment which overspread his features when, after repeated attempts to attract Hilda's notice, it dawned upon

him that she really preferred his father's conversation to his own. I suppose that never before in his life had he known a charming person display such extraordinary taste. In vain he brought his ingenuous arts to bear upon her, and forced her to look round while he shot languishing glances full into her eyes. The glances failed to arouse any response; she gave him politely but plainly to understand that his interruptions were unwelcome, answered him with a few monosyllables or a faint smile, and immediately turned away to resume her remarks to Lord Staines, who was evidently much tickled by the discomfiture of his heir-apparent.

Jim all this time was very pleasantly engaged in talking over bygone days

with Lady Mildred, only every now and again his eyes wandered to Hilda and rested upon her with a ridiculous look of pride and affection. Doubtless he was thinking how good it was of her to take so much trouble to amuse the old gentleman at the head of the table. As for the Reverend Simeon and myself, we ate our dinner, which was an excellent one, and nobody took the smallest notice of us.

Later in the evening, when we assembled in the drawing-room, Lord Staines became grave and silent once more, black Care having, I presume, recalled herself to his memory. Very soon he murmured some excuse and slipped away—perhaps to try and establish a balance between revenue and

expenditure in his study. Lady Mildred had some photographs to show to Jim, who may or may not have been as interested in them as he professed to be; Mr. Turner, for lack of a more worthy listener, was fain to favour me with his views upon the subject of secular education; and while he was expounding these at some length, I saw exactly what I had expected to see. Bracknell seated himself upon a sofa beside Hilda, who put up her fan and received him with a side glance which was half supercilious, half encouraging. He began to address her in a low tone of remonstrance. Presumably he was begging to be informed why she had treated him with such marked coolness, for presently I heard her reply, laughing slightly, "I

wouldn't press that point if I were you, Lord Bracknell. If you do, perhaps I may ask for your version of certain stories that I heard about you in London."

"What stories?" he returned eagerly. "Depend upon it, there wasn't a word of truth in them. Surely you don't believe all you are told?" And so forth, and so forth.

The remainder of the colloquy was carried on in such subdued accents that the eloquence of the Reverend Simeon, who was standing very close to me and emphasising his periods by repeated taps upon my shirt-front with his fore-finger, drowned it. But, indeed, I was not curious to hear more. How many times, I wonder, has that selfsame dialogue been

conducted in identical terms since the world began, and how many times will it be repeated before the human race becomes extinct? Generally, I think, about five to ten minutes elapse before the point is reached when the lady invites unreserved confession as the preliminary to possible absolution; and then the man tells her—well, I suppose he sometimes tells her the truth, though I should imagine that that is a rare case. What Bracknell said to Hilda, after they had moved away slowly towards the open French window, through which they presently vanished, I have no idea, nor can it be of the smallest consequence. What I do know is that they were absent for the best part of an hour, and that long before the expiration of that time Jim

had grown fidgety, Lady Mildred was looking anxious, Mr. Turner had fallen sound asleep, and this humble chronicler was well-nigh worn out with desperate efforts to sustain a conversation which flickered and died the moment that it was left alone.

At length Lord Staines returned. He had been making hay with his hair, from which I concluded that he had failed to discover any arithmetical process by which the greater can be subtracted from the less; and unless I greatly misjudged him, his inward ejaculation on seeing us was, "What! not gone yet!" But he was far too polite to utter any words to that effect, and he discoursed amiably until Bracknell and Hilda re-appeared, which they did without the least symptom

of embarrassment on either side. Then old Turner woke up suddenly, rubbed his hands and said that they had had a delightful evening, but that they really mustn't keep the carriage waiting any longer; whereupon we all wished one another good-night with much alacrity, and the party broke up.

Jim's dog-cart was at the door, and he had promised to give me a lift home; but as I was putting on my overcoat in the hall, he followed me and said, "Do you mind waiting a quarter of an hour, Harry? I should like to smoke a cigar with Bracknell before we go."

Of course I replied that I didn't mind at all, and accordingly we adjourned to the smoking-room, whither Lord Staines

did not accompany us. I don't think I have ever met any one quite so straightforward as Jim. It never occurred to him to approach any subject by a little introductory beating about the bush, as almost all of us do. If he had anything to say to you, you might be quite certain that he would say every word of it, and lose no time about doing so either. His cigar was hardly alight before he had explained matters to Bracknell in the most unequivocal language.

"Look here, Bracknell, old chap," said he, "I don't want you to flirt with Hilda Turner. We are all friends here, so I don't mind telling you that I mean to ask her to be my wife, though I'd rather you didn't speak about it to any one else just yet."

Something in this announcement seemed to tickle Bracknell amazingly; for his mirth was so immoderate and so prolonged that Jim felt constrained at last to add: "It isn't a joke."

"Oh yes, it is, my dear boy," returned the other, still laughing. "It's a first-rate joke, if you could only see it. Be advised by me, Jim, and drop that young woman like a hot potato. She's not the wife for you."

"That's as may be," rejoined Jim quietly; "but at all events she is not the wife for you."

"I should rather think she wasn't! The wife for me is a lady with 50,000*l.* of her own. Of course it would be desirable that she should have more, but 50,000*l.* is the irreducible minimum; the

governor has just been telling me so. By the way, do you think the fair Hilda is going to accept you?"

Jim, with a becoming blush, admitted that he was sanguine.

"Well, she *may*. Five thousand a year is not to be sneezed at in these hard times; and I suppose you're worth all that, aren't you?"

Jim got up and leant with his back against the mantelpiece. "Do you know, Bracknell," said he, "I don't like that way of talking. I am sure you have no intention of hurting my feelings, but, you see, it isn't pleasant to me to hear Hilda spoken of——"

"As if she resembled other women. All right, Jim; I'll spare your feelings for the future, and I don't think I'll

marry Miss Turner, thank you. I suppose I may sometimes speak to her, though?"

"Of course you may," replied Jim quite gravely. "If you tell me that you won't flirt with her, that's all I want. Only, don't you see what I mean? If you began to pay attention to Hilda, or to any other woman, what possible chance could I have? It stands to reason that I should have none. I'm neither good-looking nor clever, nor—nor anything. Why, I wouldn't even venture to pit myself against Harry Maynard!"

And with this homage to his friend's irresistible attractions and incidental acknowledgment of my own, Jim resumed his seat.

Bracknell was a little flattered, I think,

and perhaps also (though I am not quite so sure about that) a little touched. "Go on and prosper," said he. "Marriage is the greatest mistake in the world; but if you will marry, you will. Let me know when the event comes off, and I'll be your best man."

It is not always easy to tell how far the sense of duty and honour possessed by men like Bracknell may be relied upon. Doubtless there are certain offences against their fellow-men which they would under no circumstances commit; but as for the rest, I should imagine that it was very much a question of temptation. Truth compels me to admit that the temptations with which Hilda assailed the heir of Staines Court during the next few weeks were of a nature to

try the stoutest powers of resistance. I don't say that her tactics were novel; but I do say that anything more clever than her employment of them I never saw. Of course "the young people," as we were generically termed by our elders, were continually together. There were rides, there were picnics, there was lawn-tennis—in short, all the ordinary amusements of country-house life in the summer-time; and to watch Hilda and Bracknell together on those occasions would have been most entertaining if it had not been also a little distressing. She stirred his curiosity; she roused in him a spirit of emulation; she flattered his vanity one day only to wound it the next. Sometimes she ignored him as obstinately as she had done the first

evening; and every now and again, when Jim's back was turned, she would favour him with a look which I am quite sure must have sent a thrill through his whole person, though he had the credit of being accustomed to such looks. All this time she was charming in her demeanour to poor old Jim, with whom, however, she now avoided taking solitary walks; and the upshot of it was that, before a fortnight had passed, she had two sighing lovers at her feet instead of one. That may not have been a very wonderful exploit to accomplish, nevertheless it was accomplished with very great skill.

How matters must end was obvious enough; yet when the catastrophe (for I suppose it must be called a catastrophe)

came, I confess I was slightly startled. It was Mr. Turner who apprised me of it. Strolling out in the direction of Staines Court one hot morning, I came upon him just as he was hurrying through the gates, and he at once pulled up, took off his hat and began to mop his forehead. Evidently he was a prey to conflicting emotions; and indeed his first words were a confession that such was the case.

"My dear Harry," said he, "I am upset—completely upset. Tell me now—for you have an old head upon young shoulders—did it ever strike you that there was anything between my daughter and Lord Bracknell?"

I replied that that idea had suggested itself to me.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Turner. "Dear me! Well, I assure you that I never was more taken aback in my life than when Lord Bracknell came to me last night to tell me that he had proposed to Hilda and had been accepted. Ah, I see that you are astonished. The fact is that I had formed other—ahem! —anticipations. Possibly you may have shared those anticipations?"

I signified assent, and he went on: "To tell you the truth, Harry, I should have been better pleased if things had fallen out otherwise. Even now I am not sure—However, we shall see. I have just received a note from Lord Staines, requesting me to call upon him immediately, and I greatly fear that he will not be favourable to the engagement. You



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are very observant, I know: have you noticed any signs of his being disposed to—er—welcome dear Hilda as his daughter-in-law?"

I was quite unable to say that I had, and I really felt very sorry for the poor man, who seemed, through no fault of his own, to have got between the upper and the nether millstones. Nothing was more certain than that he was about to get into serious trouble with the patron of his living, and it might be safely predicted that, when he returned home, he would get into trouble not less serious with the controller of his household and his actions. I quite understood why he begged me not to mention this to *anybody*, and also who was meant by that emphatic "anybody:" for a squire in

the hand is worth two viscounts in the bush. I willingly gave him the required assurance, and he hastened away towards the house, fanning himself with his pocket-handkerchief as he went.

## CHAPTER III.

Lord Staines was a weak man, and, like most weak men, was exceedingly peremptory when roused to anger. It was certainly not poor Mr. Turner's fault that Bracknell had been brought within an ace of making an egregious ass of himself; for, as everybody knew, Mr. Turner had no more control over his daughter than he had over the Empress of China. Still, those who are invested with nominal authority should expect to be held responsible when disasters occur;

and a sad pity it is that this excellent rule is not more frequently made to apply to certain high functionaries whom one might name. Lord Staines, having got hold of Hilda's ostensible superior, led the unhappy man into his study, and then and there gave him a tremendous wigging. I made a point of calling upon the Reverend Simeon in the course of the afternoon, and found him quite shattered. Never in his life before, he said piteously, had such language been used to him, and although it was his duty as a Christian to forgive Lord Staines's words, he feared that it would be long before he would be able to forget them.

As for Bracknell, he was packed off by the first train, with a flea in his ear, and, I dare say, a cheque in his pocket.

He wrote a letter to Hilda, in which as I understood, he represented himself to be broken-hearted, but powerless. His father wouldn't hear of the engagement, and, since he was entirely dependent upon his father, there was no more to be said. Upon reflection, I feel quite sure that he must have received a cheque. Lord Staines possessed a fine old-fashioned temper, but he worshipped his son, whose will was a great deal stronger than his own, and if Bracknell had really been determined upon marrying the cook, I doubt not but that he would have snapped his fingers in his father's face and married her. Such may not improbably have been also the opinion of the fair Hilda, whose wrath at finding herself thus coolly left in the

lurch was, as I gathered from her father, very great.

Her disappointment might have been easier to bear, and the whole affair might have blown over quietly, if only Lord Staines had had the sense to hold his tongue about it. But I suppose he was flushed with victory and couldn't hold his tongue. First he told Lady Mildred, which was perhaps unavoidable; later in the day, by which time he had fully recovered his good humour, he marched down to see my mother, and boasted a little of the facility which which he had nipped this folly and nonsense in the bud.

"Rely upon it, my dear Mrs. Maynard," said he, "there is nothing like promptitude and decision in these cases.

People tell me that I have over-indulged Bracknell, and possibly I have; but I believe he understands pretty well that there are certain limits which he had better not transgress. I can't afford to have a pauper daughter-in-law, and there's an end of it."

My mother said it was all very worldly and shocking, and that if Lord Staines had nothing worse than lack of fortune to urge against Hilda, he ought to be ashamed of himself. However, he was not at all ashamed of himself, and I take it that he must have gone about freely extolling the virtue of promptitude and decision, for in a few days the whole neighbourhood was in possession of the facts, together with such emendations and additions as individual taste

had grafted on to them in the process of transmission.

Among the first to be informed of what had occurred was Jim, who rode over to our house in a great state of heat to ask me whether I had heard what he was pleased to call "an infernal lying report." When I was obliged to tell him that the report alluded to, however infernal it might be, was substantially correct, I really thought for a moment that he was going to hit me between the eyes. But he renounced that intention, if he had ever entertained it, and only dropped into a chair, with a look of pain and reproach on his face which hurt me almost as much as if I had deserved it.

"And you knew that Bracknell was

humbugging me all this time?" he exclaimed.

I had not said so, but the fact was undeniable. I fancy that, upon the first blush of the thing, he was more grieved by Bracknell's treachery than by Hilda's inconstancy, and I could not get him to pay much attention to the excuses which I made both for the culprit and for myself; though I venture to think that these were neither intrinsically poor nor badly put. But when in the plenitude of my generosity I began to make excuses for Hilda too, he stopped me at once.

"That's enough, Harry," he interrupted. "You mean well; but you don't seem to see that apologising on Hilda's behalf is implying that she is to blame.

I can't admit that for an instant. She never gave me anything in the shape of a promise; and if I chose to imagine that she cared for me, the more fool I."

"Well, perhaps so," I agreed. "Anyhow, it's very evident that she did *not* care for you."

"Yes," he replied sighing; "that's evident, I suppose. And yet I can't help thinking that she might have cared for me if Bracknell hadn't come down. But there's no good in talking about that now. I shall be off somewhere for the next few months, I think. You couldn't be persuaded to come with me to Switzerland, and perhaps spend the winter in Italy, could you?"

I reminded him that I was not a man of independent fortune, and that

my winter would have to be spent in the less agreeable atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn, where I had already taken chambers; but I strongly advised him to go away and travel. He had so many friends that he was not likely to be left long without a companion. I fear that he did not find me very sympathetic; and in truth it was all I could do to restrain myself from openly congratulating him upon his escape.

Presently he said that if my mother was well enough to receive him, he would just go and say good morning to her, and I knew better than to accompany him to her room. From that quarter those who were afflicted in mind, body, or estate, could always count upon obtaining sympathy, if not comfort; and

sure enough, when Jim emerged, after an interview of half an hour, he looked so much less inclined to hang himself that I was afraid my mother had committed the imprudence of advising him to try again. But that, it appeared, was a groundless alarm.

"Oh, no," he said quietly, in answer to my inquiry, "she didn't give me any hope. She was awfully kind though, and I believe it's quite true that I shall get over this some day. Only I wish Bracknell had been a little more straight about it."

Well, upon the whole, that seemed to be a very proper spirit in which to meet adversity, and I accompanied my friend down stairs, hoping that, after all, he might not be quite as hard hit

as I had supposed. But when we reached the front-door, whom should we find talking affably to the groom and caressing Jim's horse, but Miss Hilda Turner in person!

Jim started violently, while I, for my part, inwardly commended her to the devil; for I could not doubt her purpose in waiting outside in that unseemly way.

"Why did you not come in?" I asked with a touch of asperity. "I presume you called to see my mother, didn't you?"

"I did," she replied calmly, and never so much as changed colour; "but when I saw Jim's horse at the door, I thought I would wait for him and call on Mrs. Maynard some other day. I know it tires her to have more than one visitor

at a time. Jim, if you have nothing better to do, you might walk home with me."

"Good Heavens!" thought I to myself, "is she going to propose to him?" I took the liberty of raising my eyebrows ostentatiously, but I doubt whether any evolutions which I could have induced my eyebrows to perform would have disturbed her equanimity. She met my gaze with perfect composure, and it was I, not she, who eventually had to look the other way.

The countenance of that foolish Jim expressed mingled surprise, pleasure, and doubt. What was the good of my giving him a surreptitious dig in the back and making grimaces at him when he turned round? Hilda had but to beckon to

him and he would have gone with her to the world's end. He went with her unhesitatingly to the end of our short avenue, leading his horse; and there they were lost to my gaze. But it was not necessary to be gifted with second sight in order to feel tolerably sure of what was taking place between them after they had vanished; and I returned to the study of the law with misgivings which were only too soon to be justified. An hour or so later, while I was immersed in pleadings, and was cumbering my brain with the absurd jargon of replications, rejoinders, surrejoinders, rebutters, and the like, I heard somebody ride full gallop up to the house, immediately after which my door was burst open, as by a charge of dynamite,

and Jim, victorious and triumphant, stood before me once more. One glance at his face was sufficient to show me that it was all up with him.

"You needn't go into ecstasies," I said snappishly; "I know all about it."

"Now, my dear Harry," he remonstrated, "how can you possibly know all about it?"

"At least," said I, "I know that you are engaged to Hilda Turner."

He gave me to understand in reply that such was indeed his good fortune. "And do you know," he continued, "the truth is—it's so glorious that I can hardly believe it, and yet I feel somehow as if I had always been sure of it—the truth is that she has loved me all along!"

"Then," I could not help remarking, "she took the very oddest way of showing her affection that ever I heard of."

Jim said, "Not at all odd; the same kind of thing has often happened before, as everybody knows. It all arose out of my stupid bashfulness. She naturally thought that I couldn't care much about her, since I wouldn't speak out; and so when Bracknell made his offer she accepted him. She says she would have accepted anybody under the circumstances—and I can quite understand it."

Obviously reasoning would be thrown away upon such a lunatic; nevertheless, to set myself straight with my conscience, I endeavoured to reason with him.

"It appears, then," said I, "that she sought you out in order to avow her love. If she was not too proud to do that to-day, why in the world couldn't she have done it a few weeks ago?"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jim, "what a low opinion you have of your fellow creatures! Sought me out indeed! Why, my dear fellow, you wouldn't believe what trouble I had to extort the truth from her. What she sought me out for —not that she did seek me out—was to beg me to try and make peace between her father and old Staines. That, of course, led us to speak about Bracknell, and then I couldn't help telling her how long I had loved her, and then at last she admitted that she had only promised to marry him out of pique. But

she was very unwilling to accept me, I can tell you. Harry, old chap, you don't know Hilda ; she's the sweetest girl in England !"

If she was, I certainly did not know her ; but to make such a rejoinder as that would only have been to expose myself to a surrejoinder which it would have been altogether futile to attempt to rebut ; so I said what was expected of me with as good a grace as I could command, and as soon as Jim was gone I kicked those odious law books to the other end of the room, in token alike of my abhorrence for them individually, and of my disgust with a state of things which I was powerless to remedy.

## CHAPTER IV.

It has ever been my wish to look with an impartial eye alike upon the just and upon the unjust. Being, I hope, to some extent conscious of my own small failings and very desirous that full credit should be allowed to me for my virtues, it is but fair that I should acknowledge the virtues of those whom I dislike, if by diligent searching I can discover that they possess any. And so I am really glad to be able to say for Hilda Turner that I believe she was as fond of Jim

as it was in her nature to be of anybody. This concession may the more readily be made because, to tell the truth, it does not amount to much when looked into. Other things being equal, she would, I take it, have preferred Jim to Bracknell ; but other things were not equal, because Bracknell was a viscount, who would some day be an earl, whereas Jim would assuredly never be anything but a moderately well-to-do country squire. Still I am bound to confess that when her first string broke she took up her second with a very good grace. Whether, as I suspected at the time, she precipitated her engagement by way of conveying a slap in the face to the too dutiful Bracknell, or whether she had got wind of Jim's proposed exodus and

feared to lose him altogether by delay, certain it is that she bore herself with dignity and general amiability in a situation which must have been somewhat embarrassing, and also that she made Jim supremely happy. More than that could not reasonably have been required of her.

The young couple were, to all appearance, thoroughly satisfied with one another, and their satisfaction was very commonly, if not quite universally, shared by their friends and relatives. Old Turner rubbed his plump white hands, and declared that the wish of his heart was now fulfilled ; Lord Staines was so delighted that he could not rest until he had walked over to the Rectory and announced his delight ; and my mother,

though secretly a little disappointed (for Jim was a great favourite of hers), did not hesitate to aver that all was for the best. It is true that she would have said and thought the selfsame thing if she had just heard me sentenced to be hanged by the neck until I was dead —such being her simple creed. Taking her stand upon certain passages of Scripture, she boldly asserted that it was not for us to judge whether this or that event would be productive of ultimate good or not, and, in short, adopted without reservation the doctrine that whatever is is right.

To fall in with my dear mother's views in this respect has never been possible to me, and amid the general chorus of approval I found some com-

fort in listening to a dissentient voice which harmonised with my own. It was a very quiet little voice, but it was a sweet one, and was seldom used to utter disparaging remarks about anybody. "Since you ask me," Lady Mildred said, "I am not glad, I am sorry. It seems to me that Hilda is not good enough for Mr. Leigh."

"That," I observed, "is beyond all question."

"Yes ; and I don't understand her changing her mind so quickly. Of course it was impossible that Bracknell should marry her ; but if it had been possible they might have got on together well enough, perhaps. I am fonder of Bracknell than of anybody else in the world, and I don't know that she is

exactly good enough for him either. But he is different from Mr. Leigh. I mean that if he had found out afterwards that Hilda was not quite—quite what he had fancied her, I don't think he would have taken it so much to heart."

These were precisely my sentiments; but as no one had the remotest intention of consulting either me or Lady Mildred, we could not do better than keep them to ourselves ; and we kept them to ourselves accordingly.

Of Bracknell I heard nothing, nor, I suppose, did Jim receive congratulations from that quarter, although I did not like to ask him the question. No doubt he had forgiven his old friend, as he could well afford to do, being more or less in the position of a conqueror. His

marriage was appointed to take place in the ensuing month of January, and soon after hearing of this arrangement I left home to be formally called to the bar and to take possession of the chambers, where I am thankful to say that my legal library has remained unconsulted from that day to this. For then it was that I received my first substantial encouragement to persevere with those literary labours which have since made life pleasant to me, and have even enabled me to afford an occasional pat of butter with my bread.

During the autumn and early winter, my mother, who writes the most delightful letters that ever were penned by mortal hand, kept me fully informed of all that was going on down at Cranfield;

and by her account all was going on quite as it ought. Jim, assisted by the counsels of the bride-elect, was refurnishing Elmhurst from attic to basement; his uncle and aunt, a very uninteresting old couple, whom nobody ever saw, and whom nobody but my mother would have dreamt of regretting, had already taken their departure for Bath, where they proposed to reside in future; "and dear Mildred," my mother added, "is behaving *so* sweetly about it all. She seems quite to share Jim's happiness, and some day, I hope, she herself will be as happy as she deserves to be." I confess that the significance of the above encomium escaped me at the time; although I certainly might have perceived it if I had not been a little dense.

A few days before Christmas I seated myself in the down express from Paddington, being bound for Cranfield, with the twofold object of spending that festive season at home and assisting at Jim's subsequent nuptials. Just as the train was starting a young man of fashionable exterior jumped into the carriage, tumbled over my legs, apologised, and then said, "Oh, it's you, Maynard, is it? Going down to the old shop?"

I replied that such was my destination, but that I presumed it wasn't his—not that I really presumed anything of the kind, but because I thought that, taking everything into consideration, Bracknell would have shown better taste by remaining absent from the paternal abode at that particular juncture.

"Oh, yes, I'm going to Staines Court," he returned. "Why shouldn't I?"

"If you don't know, I'm sure I don't," I answered.

"My dear fellow," said Bracknell, lighting a cigar, "if you were to be bound to avoid every woman with whom you had ever been in love, your life would be a perpetual game of hide-and-seek. In fact, the thing really couldn't be done. How is that dear old duffer Jim getting on? Lord! what an existence he has before him! It was a bad day for him when the governor refused to let me take Miss Hilda off his hands. That girl will end by breaking his heart, you'll see."

"She does not," I observed, "appear to have broken yours."

Bracknell smiled, but it struck me that he also winced ever so slightly. "Women are all the same," said he; "a man who allowed one of them to break his heart would be a great fool. Jim is a great fool."

"If being too chivalrous for the world that we live in is being a fool, he certainly is one," I agreed; and I hardly know what prompted me to add, "I hope you will always be as loyal to him as he is to you, Bracknell."

It was rather a silly speech to make, and perhaps also rather an impertinent one, but Bracknell did not appear to resent it. He stared for a moment, and then said, "I suppose he didn't like my cutting him out, eh? It was rough upon him, I admit; but how the deuce was I to help it?"

Being unable to make any concise reply to that question, I only answered, "Well, it is all over now, and the less said about it the better."

So, by way of changing the subject, my companion began to entertain me with an account of a steeplechase in which he had recently taken part, and this, with occasional breaks, lasted us to our journey's end.

I should have liked to witness the meeting between Bracknell and Hilda, but that pleasure was denied me. On Christmas Day I dined at Staines Court, my mother, who was unable to leave her room, insisting upon my accepting the invitation which had been sent to me to join the party assembled there. The house was full of Henleys and Beau-

champs, relations of Lord Staines's, who were unknown to me; but the very first thing that I saw on entering the drawing-room was a little group, composed of Hilda, Lady Mildred, Bracknell, and Jim. They were conversing together in the most friendly manner, and had evidently made up their minds to let bygones be bygones. Jim beckoned to me, and very soon drew me aside to whisper, "Isn't Bracknell a good fellow? I don't believe there's another man in England who would have taken things as he has done and come down here just to show us that he bears no malice!"

It might be that Bracknell had come to Staines Court for that amiable purpose, but I had some difficulty in supposing it. In the first place, he can hardly

have thought that any one would suspect him of bearing malice, and in the second, he might so easily have written a letter calculated to allay such apprehensions. There, however, he was, chatting to Hilda as unconcernedly as ever; and even if he was bent upon mischief—which, after all, did not seem very likely—it was certain that Jim would never believe it of him.

Miss Turner was not suffered to retain possession of him long. I think I have already mentioned that Bracknell was one of those happy (one must presume that they are happy) men whom frisky young matrons delight to honour. There were several ladies among the company who answered to that description, and they skirmished

over him in a manner diverting to behold, and flattering, no doubt, to the subject of their strife. Between them they bore him away, a not unwilling victim, and until the evening was far advanced we country neighbours could only admire him from afar. Lord Staines, twirling his grey moustache, watched his son's triumph with a benign smile. Probably he had no objection to Bracknell's flirting with any number of ladies, so long as they were not unmarried and penniless. He himself was looking younger and more cheerful than he had done in the summer, having, as I learnt in the course of a brief interview with Lady Mildred, landed a handsome sum over the Cesarewitch.

At a late hour somebody—I suppose

it must have been Bracknell—suggested a game of pool. About ten of us, including two or three ladies, adjourned to the billiard-room, and then it was that I was able to take a few mental notes of Hilda's demeanour towards her former lover. Her position was not a very comfortable one; because everybody in the room knew that she had consented to marry Bracknell only a few months before, and she must have known quite well that they knew it. Her serenity, however, was not ruffled, nor did she fall into any of the mistakes which she might so easily have made, and which a woman of more feeling could hardly have avoided making. She neither shunned Bracknell nor thrust herself upon his notice; she was

neither over-friendly with him nor the reverse. When he spoke to her she answered him civilly, and once or twice she even addressed him first, but indeed she was in an unusually quiet mood and spoke very little to anybody. If there was a criticism to be made upon her, it might have been that she was just a trifle too affectionate with Jim, whispering a word or two in his ear occasionally, as she passed round the table, and glancing quickly at him for applause whenever she had achieved a brilliant stroke.

After the game had been going on for some little time Bracknell came and threw himself down on the sofa beside me. "By George!" he exclaimed, in an undertone which had a ring of

vexation in it, "that girl has no more heart than a stone!"

"That," replied I, "is no news to me and no business of yours."

"And to think," he went on, without heeding my remark, "that she has spent the whole of her life in a country parsonage! So much for rural simplicity! Why, there isn't one of these Belgravian women who could hold a candle to her for coolness!"

I don't know what he had expected her to say or do; but he was evidently annoyed, and added that he wouldn't be in Jim's shoes for a trifle. He was obliging me with his views upon feminine nature in general, which, I am sorry to say, were too disrespectful and too crudely expressed to bear repetition,

when somebody called out to him that it was his turn to play.

He had a long and rather difficult shot to make, and at the instant when he was drawing back his cue Hilda all of a sudden stepped close behind him, so that he struck her sharply in the side with the butt end of it. She gave a little cry and fell back upon the sofa where I was sitting. Bracknell, full of apologies and alarm, dropped his cue and peered anxiously at the blanched cheeks of the sufferer; Jim came tearing up from the other end of the room; somebody ran for a glass of water; the rest of the players crowded round the sofa, and we had quite a little scene. At length Hilda got back her breath, and, smiling faintly, assured us that she was not really hurt.

"It is nothing—nothing at all," she said. "It was my own fault entirely, and I shall be all right in a few minutes. Please go on with the game and don't look at me."

To this day I can't feel sure that she did it on purpose. If she did, I am glad to think that she received a considerably smarter dig in the ribs than she had bargained for. In any case, this trifling incident had the effect of producing a complete alteration in Bracknell's humour. He was naturally concerned at having hurt a lady, and it may be that his self-reproach was increased by the recollection that he had been saying hard things of her the minute before. He remained sitting beside her after she had gently pushed Jim away, and the others, at her request,

had resumed their game, and I saw that a rapid interchange of words took place between them. Their colloquy was soon interrupted; but it had lasted long enough to bring a slightly increased colour into Bracknell's cheeks and a pensive look into his eyes. Knowing what I did of Miss Hilda, I was convinced that she must either wish to subjugate him once more or to avenge herself upon him; and, all things considered, there seemed to be a very fair chance of her succeeding in her aim, whatever that might be.

When I said as much to my mother on the following morning, after giving her the full account which she always likes to have of what had taken place at the dinner-party and after it, she

shook her head. "Ah, my dear Harry," she sighed, "you are too ready to seek for bad motives and study bad people—that is, if poor Hilda is really bad. If I were you, I should find it much more interesting to study Mildred. Is she too good to be attractive?"

"Are you suggesting that I should fall in love with Lady Mildred?" I inquired.

"My dear boy, no! What would Lord Staines say? Besides, I am afraid you would be a day too late. Have you really not discovered Mildred's secret, Harry?—you, who are so quick-sighted!"

We all have our weaknesses; and amongst the many to which I should have to plead guilty, if placed upon my oath, is that of fancying that I can read

the hearts and minds of my neighbours with some facility. Now, in truth it had not occurred to me until then that Lady Mildred had lost her heart to Jim, but as I could not bear to admit my stupidity, I made no direct reply, merely observing that there was a difference between what was attractive and what was interesting to study, and that bad people were more interesting to study than good ones because, as a rule, their motives of action were more obscure.

"I suppose so," agreed my mother absently. "Poor Jim!"

"Really," said I (because I was provoked with her for having seen what I had failed to detect), "I do not understand why you should pity him. All

is for the best in the best of possible worlds, you know."

"I believe that all is ordered for our good," she answered simply; "though I fear that you do not. We must not presume to say that it would have been better for our friend to marry Mildred than Hilda, who, after all, has a great deal that is nice about her. Poor Jim!"

My dear mother permits herself a touch of dry humour at times which, I think, refreshes her. She glanced up at me half deprecatingly after this last ejaculation, and we had a little laugh together. I suppose she perceived as plainly as I did that there was trouble coming, but she did not choose to talk about it before it came, and probably she was quite right.

## CHAPTER V.

I AM but a poor equestrian and can only speak upon such subjects with the diffidence which beseems me, but I have always understood from those who ought to know that the hunting in our parts is of an inferior order. The covert-shooting, on the other hand, is fairly good, and that belonging to the Staines Court property may almost be called famous. Now Lord Staines had left his coverts untouched until Christmas, being, as I verily believe, instigated to this act

of self-denial by a desire to please his heir, who at that time was one of the best shots in England. Great, therefore, must have been his surprise, and great also his disappointment on finding that Bracknell preferred to follow the hounds during his stay, and that he could not even be persuaded to take his gun out of its case on non-hunting days.

"It seems to me," the poor old gentleman declared in my hearing, "that he must have taken leave of his senses. I really can't account for his behaviour in any other way."

I could have accounted for it; though I am not prepared to say that my explanation excluded the hypothesis of insanity. I could have told Lord Staines that, indifferent as the hunting was, there

was a certain country gentleman in the neighbourhood who was devoted to it, heart and soul; that this gentleman had recently presented a well-broken saddle-horse to his betrothed; and further, that when Bracknell was not out hunting with the couple aforesaid he was amusing himself in some other and perhaps less innocent fashion in the company of one of them. But I did not tell him this, partly because I was not asked, and partly because I am constitutionally averse to being blown up sky-high. I will do myself the justice to say that I would have risked a good deal of personal discomfort to get Bracknell dismissed a second time from the neighbourhood; but I was well aware that nothing short of ocular proof would have made Lord Staines believe

his son capable of behaviour unworthy of a gentleman. To make love to your friend's *fiancée* under your friend's nose must undoubtedly be described in that disagreeable way; and I hardly think that the circumstance of the lady in question being an unscrupulous minx can be admitted as an extenuating one.

If any palliation of Bracknell's conduct had been discoverable, I suppose one would have had to look for it in the tone of the society which he was accustomed to frequent. In certain sets it seems to be almost imperative upon a man that he should make love to somebody, provided always that she be not a person whom he can marry. Bracknell may have opined that Miss Turner was as good as married already, and that she was conse-

quently a safe and fit subject for his attentions. For the rest, she gave him every encouragement. I used to meet them riding home from hunting together at a suspiciously early hour of the day; Bracknell was for ever dropping in to luncheon or tea at the Rectory; and Jim had no words to express his satisfaction at the good feeling which subsisted between his friend and his future wife. He confided to me that he had hardly ventured to hope for such a happy state of things.

When the hunting was abruptly put a stop to by a sharp frost, which in a few days rendered the ice on the great lake at Staines Court thick enough to bear, this estimable pair had further opportunities of showing how well disposed

they were towards one another. Bracknell excelled in skating, as indeed he did in all sports and pastimes of an athletic nature; and in Hilda he found an apt pupil. Jim, who was by no means such a proficient, would listen respectfully to Bracknell's instructions, and when the couple skimmed away from him, as they often did, would watch them from afar, with pride and admiration in his eyes. They were the two people whom he loved best in the world, and I believe it gave him far more pleasure to contemplate their achievements than it would have done to obtain any kind of personal distinction.

For reasons of my own, I usually prefer to shun the giddy throng when on skates. One afternoon I had found a nice sequestered spot, screened from view by

an island, and was very busy practising a graceful piece of figure-skating (outside edge forwards, inside edge backwards, and then down with a thump) when Bracknell and Hilda suddenly shot out from behind the clump of evergreen shrubs which had masked my movements. They swept past me, hand in hand, and in that still atmosphere a few words fell clear and distinct upon my ear. "Oh, *what* a bore! Can't we get rid of him somehow?" And then a low laugh from Hilda and a reply which distance rendered unintelligible to me.

An instant later came the sound of short, scuffling strokes, denoting the approach of an unskilful skater, and Jim's colossal form loomed into view. "Hi! you two," I heard him shout, "wait for

me!" And away he went, full tilt, round the miniature cape which Bracknell and Hilda had already doubled.

I hardly knew why this brief dissolving view should have set my blood boiling with indignation, for I really had not been in need of any further evidence that poor Jim was being made a fool of; but so it was. "Oh, you would like to get rid of him, would you?" said I to myself, starting off in pursuit. "Then, my good friends, you sha'n't get rid of him, nor of me either."

However, I was prevented from carrying out my benevolent intentions; for I had not got well under way before I encountered Jim, returning post-haste.

"Where are you off to in such a

hurry?" I asked, holding up my hand to stop him.

He checked his career with some difficulty, describing an immense semicircle in order to bring up alongside of me. "Hilda wants her jacket," he explained breathlessly; "she has left it up at the house."

"And she has despatched you a mile to fetch it! One would have thought that she might have sent Bracknell. But never mind. You go back to her; I'll get her confounded jacket."

I could not help confounding her jacket, but I saw that Jim was a little surprised and displeased at my doing so. "My dear boy," he said gently, "there's no occasion for you to give yourself all that bother. I don't mind going."

"Well, then," I returned, provoked beyond the limits of prudence, "*I* mind your going. Heavens and earth! man, do you imagine that it is because she is afraid of catching cold that Hilda orders you off on an errand which will take you a good three quarters of an hour to accomplish? Do you suppose, by any chance, that Bracknell has stayed down here all this time because he enjoys third-class hunting, or because he thinks skating on a pond better fun than disporting himself in London? It is not permissible to be so stupid!"

Jim's face became very grave. "Bracknell is staying here to be present at our wedding," he replied; "he has given up a lot of other engagements rather than disappoint us. As for Hilda, I may tell

you that she wouldn't have let me get her jacket for her if I hadn't insisted upon it." He added, with something of an effort: "Harry, we're old friends, and I'd stand a great deal from you before I'd quarrel with you; but I'm bound to say that if you make such an insinuation as that again, we can't be friends any longer. I suppose you have got into a habit of suspecting that every man you meet may be a rascal, and now you can't help yourself. I don't want to preach to you, old chap, but it's a beastly bad habit to have got into, and that's the truth."

Such was the reward that I obtained for my well-meant, but injudicious meddling. I am sorry to say that I was foolish enough to feel deeply affronted by Jim's rebuke, and a coolness arose

between us which might not have been easily dispelled, had not subsequent events drawn us together again. It was, at all events, pretty evident that, so far as I was concerned, matters must be allowed to take their course. I could not open Jim's eyes, and to remonstrate with Bracknell would have been sheer waste of breath.

Somebody was found, however, with sufficient faith in him and in herself to attempt this useless task. It was some days after the ice had broken up, and when we were within a week of Jim's wedding-day, that demure little Lady Mildred told me how uneasy the intimacy of her brother with the bride-elect was making her. "I don't mind talking to you about it," she said, "because I know

you have seen it all as plainly as I have. I suppose you blame Bracknell very much, do you not?"

"Why, of course I do," I replied.

"Yes; but he is not really so bad as you think—he does not see anything wrong in it. He only laughed when I spoke to him, and said I didn't know what I was talking about. And so it will go on until something dreadful happens."

"My dear Lady Mildred," said I, "I don't think anything dreadful will happen. If I know the charming Hilda at all, she will always stop a little short of dreadful things. People who do dreadful things lose their place in society and have to put up with all manner of inconveniences. She will contrive to amuse herself, no doubt, but so long as her husband shuts

his eyes, and doesn't mind, what can that matter to anybody?"

Lady Mildred did not seem pleased with my philosophy. "That is as much as to say that you care very little what becomes of your friend," she observed.

"Quite so," I returned, keeping my temper. "When I venture to speak a word in season to my friend, he flies at me like a bull-dog, and tells me to mind my own business; when I leave him alone, you reproach me with caring very little about him. At this rate, a friend seems likely to prove a troublesome luxury."

The truth was that I trembled for poor Jim's future quite as much as Lady Mildred did, but when things are inevitable what can a wise man do but make the

best of them? My confidence in Hilda's discretion was quite sincere; and that only shows how mistaken the wisest of us may be every now and then. Could I — could anybody — anticipate what the next move of that remarkable young woman was going to be? Anyhow none of us did anticipate it.

A few days before that on which the wedding had been appointed to take place, I was invited to luncheon at the Rectory, it having been intimated to me that I should be expected to make myself useful subsequently in helping to move furniture and carry out other preparations for the feast at which Mr. Turner proposed to entertain his friends after the ceremony. When I arrived I found Jim and Mr. Sparks, the curate, seated in the

drawing-room with our host, but Hilda was conspicuous by her absence. Her absence had become quite disagreeably conspicuous when the clock struck half-past two, by which time we were all very hungry, besides having reached the extreme limit of our subjects of conversation. In the course thereof it had transpired that Bracknell had come over in his dog-cart two or three hours before, and had persuaded Hilda to go out for a drive with him. "But she assured me," said Mr. Turner, fidgeting about uneasily, "that she would be back very shortly, and I am altogether at a loss to account for this delay."

"Oh, they'll turn up all right," returned Jim composedly. "Bracknell never knows what time of day it is. I don't think

they deserve that we should wait any longer for them, though."

Here the curate, a good-natured but not very intelligent young man, judged it appropriate to remark, with a loud laugh, "Upon my word, Mr. Leigh, you will have to look after this young lady. It's early days for her to begin driving off with a gay bachelor and finding his company so agreeable that she forgets to come home to luncheon."

After this graceful sally on the part of Sparks, we went into the dining-room and refreshed ourselves; but we listened in vain for the sound of Bracknell's chariot-wheels, and at length Jim, whose lawyer was coming down from London to see him, was compelled to leave us. His composure remained undisturbed up to

the last; but as soon as he was gone Mr. Turner confided to me that he, for his part, was becoming seriously alarmed.

"I would not mention it while James was here," he said, "but it struck me that Lord Bracknell was driving a somewhat restive animal and I cannot help fearing that some accident has occurred."

If any accident had occurred within ten miles of us, we should certainly have heard of it by that time, and so I told him, but he was not convinced; and as the poor old fellow was evidently fretting himself into a fever, I could but offer to scour the country in search of the absentees. Accordingly I set out in one direction while the good-natured Sparks trudged away in another; and a very disagreeable walk I had of it through

the rain, which began to come down immediately after I started. None of the people whom I met had seen Bracknell, upon whose head I did not invoke a blessing when I reached home after dark, drenched to the skin. I was perfectly sure that neither he nor Hilda had come to any physical harm; because persons of that kind very rarely get their necks broken (unless it be by the hand of the public executioner, and that only if they happen to belong to the lower orders), but I did think that between them they were carrying impudence about as far as it could very well be carried. However, as I did not at that time foresee that I should ever write the history of these delinquents, I ceased to think about them as soon as I had finished my dinner, and,

having made myself comfortable with a blazing fire and a cigar, set to work upon an article of which I hoped to have the skeleton completed before bed-time.

I was getting on quite nicely, and had scribbled down several epigrammatic sayings to be scattered carelessly over my composition and to cheer the persevering reader on his way through it, when I was informed that Mr. Turner was down stairs and wanted to see me "most particular." This announcement was speedily followed by the entrance of Mr. Turner himself in an indescribable state of agitation. On seeing his pale face and rumpled hair, I naturally concluded that I had done Nemesis an injustice, and exclaimed, "*Has* there been an accident then after all?"

But he spread out his hands with a gesture of despair and answered, "Ah, no! No accident—no accident! Design!" After which he became so incoherent and unintelligible that I had to seat him in my arm-chair, and pour out a stiff brandy and soda for him. This he swallowed, throwing back his head and closing his eyes, as if it had been hemlock; and when he had drained the last drop of it, he felt in his pocket for a note, which he handed to me.

"Read that, Harry," said he tragically. "Read it, my dear young friend, and tell me, if you can, what is to be done? Because I am willing to confess to you that what to do I know not at all."

The note, which I perused with no

small curiosity and astonishment, ran as follows :

"ROYAL HOTEL, STOKINGHAM.

"DEAR PAPA,—Lord Bracknell and I were married before the registrar here this morning. It is all quite legal and regular, of course ; but we think we ought not to omit the religious ceremony, although circumstances have prevented us from going through it in the ordinary way ; and so we propose to drive over early to-morrow morning and be married again *quite privately* by you. I am sure you will understand how advisable this is in order to prevent scandal, and I need not warn you that not a word must be said at Staines Court until it is all over and we have left again. Afterwards you can break the news to Lord Staines.

Bracknell thinks his father will not have been made uneasy by his non-appearance, as he often runs up to London without mentioning that he is going to do so. Please tell Sarah that I shall want all my things packed up, and that she must begin doing it *at once*, and sit up all night, if necessary, as there is no time to lose. I have engaged another maid to meet us in London, and shall not take Sarah with me. Do not distress yourself about this sudden resolution of ours; you will see that all will come right in the end. We shall be with you soon after nine o'clock to-morrow morning.

"Your affectionate daughter,

"HILDA BRACKNELL."

I can testify that the above is a strictly

literal reproduction, because I wrote it down word for word immediately after I had read it, thinking it worthy of remembrance as a curiosity in the way of epistolary composition. Never, I imagine, was a treacherous act avowed with more cynical effrontery. The writer seemed to have forgotten altogether that she had been engaged to be married in the course of a few days to an honest man who had the folly to adore her. One can't think of everything, and I suppose she was fully absorbed by the important considerations set forth in her letter. She was anxious to avoid unnecessary scandal; she did not wish to incur the discomfort of a stormy interview with Lord Staines; and she was determined not to part with her new clothes. If

she had wandered away from these main points she might perhaps have confused her father's mind, which, to be sure, was not a very clear one.

I really could not see my way to offering that unlucky man much comfort. "If you wish for my opinion," I replied when he repeated his demand, "I should say that you had better read the marriage service over them and then pack them off with all despatch. After that, it will be your pleasing duty to impart the good news to Lord Staines, keeping well out of the reach of his arm while you do so. I don't know that it is any business of mine; but in common charity I will undertake Jim. May Heaven send us both a good deliverance!"

Mr. Turner sighed piteously, and de-

clared that this would bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. I was really sorry for him; for in truth his position was not an agreeable one; so I listened sympathetically while he bewailed himself for a time; but at length the habit of meek subordination which characterised him restored order to his ideas; he remembered that Sarah must be instructed to pack the trousseau forthwith, and, jumping up, trotted off homewards.

As soon as I had got rid of the Reverend Simeon, I went to bed. Nowadays I can take up my work and perform it with more or less of facility, whatever may be my mental condition; but I suppose that in earlier life I must have been less callous, for I felt that it

would be out of the question to attack that unfinished article again while I could think of nothing but poor old Jim and the cruel blow which it would be my lot to strike him on the morrow. If any one who reads these lines has ever been obliged to kill a favourite dog, he will in some measure appreciate my sensations. The thing has to be done; it is necessary and merciful to do it; but the necessity is a horrible one, and makes you feel, for the time being, very like a traitor and a murderer. Unfortunately, too, Jim and I were not upon the best of terms, by reason of that fruitless note of warning which I had thought proper to sound in his ear, and I knew that, in acquitting myself of my present mission, I should have the air of saying "I told

you so!" Not that in reality I had foretold or foreseen what had occurred, for I had never dreamt that Hilda wished to marry Bracknell, nor, for that matter, that he would be so mad as to marry her if she did wish it; still it was plain that, under the circumstances, I should be an unwelcome ambassador; and as I lay broad awake, I almost regretted that I had not rather offered to face Lord Staines, who, if the worst came to the worst, could do no more than swear at me.

Being thus harassed, I naturally got little sleep that night, and was glad when the first glimmer of dawn gave me an excuse for getting up and stealing out of doors. I wandered about till breakfast time; but I did not go to

church to witness "the religious ceremony" alluded to by Hilda, edifying though it would doubtless have been to watch the demeanour of the bride and bridegroom on that occasion.

## CHAPTER VI.

As matters fell out, the task of enlightening Lord Staines was thrown upon my shoulders, in addition to that with which I had already saddled myself; for scarcely had I finished my breakfast when Mr. Turner arrived, trembling and breathless, to say that he really did not feel equal to encountering the brunt of his patron's wrath.

"Indeed," he added, with a ludicrous effort to regain his accustomed suave pomposity, "I am not sure that it would be right on my part to do so. I have

not forgotten the very improper terms in which Lord Staines chose to address me when I called upon him once before on—er—a somewhat similar errand, and both for his sake and for my own, any repetition of such a scene is—er—to be deprecated. To you profanity of language would be less shocking—at least, I mean that you must be more accustomed to hearing it; and—er—in short—"

"In short," I interrupted, not over respectfully—for really the Reverend Simeon's aspect at that moment was not calculated to induce respect—"you want me to do your dirty work for you. Very well; I don't particularly mind; I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. Only I don't promise to prevent Lord Staines from going down to the

Rectory later in the day, and shocking you with profane language. It may not be altogether your fault that your daughter has disgraced herself and inveigled Bracknell into disgracing himself with her, but you may as well be prepared to be told that it is. If I were in your place I should be a good deal more frightened of Jim Leigh than of Lord Staines."

"Gently, my dear young friend, gently!" returned Mr. Turner with dignity. "You are excited, and I do not blame you for it; but to say that my daughter has disgraced herself is to say too much—a great deal too much. That she did very wrong in engaging herself to James, I allow, and he will not find me slow to express my sincere sorrow and sympathy; but we must bear in

mind that her affections were given in the first place to Lord Bracknell. I will not say that the young people were justified in taking the law into their own hands; yet I may doubt whether Lord Staines's motives for forbidding them to marry were of the highest kind. Now do not answer me, I beg of you. I can see that you are not yet master of yourself. If you will allow me I will go up stairs and sit with your dear mother while you walk over to Staines Court."

Evidently Hilda had been talking to him, and it would be absurd to waste good indignation upon such hopeless ineptitude.

"Pray do so, Mr. Turner," I answered, "my mother will be very glad to see you. Only I hope you will kindly refrain from

expounding your views to her with regard to your daughter's marriage, because she is rather subject to attacks of nausea."

With this valedictory shot, I set out to perform the first and least painful of the duties which I had accepted. I found Lord Staines in his study, and, apparently, in a rather bad humour."

"Oh, how do you do, Maynard?" said he, looking up from the letter which he was writing. "Do you happen to know anything about that fellow Bracknell? When I was his age it used to be considered the civil thing just to let your father know when you proposed to leave his house or return to it; but nowadays the young men seem to think that they needn't take any notice of their fathers,

except when they want money. Here is Bracknell gone off, nobody knows where, at the very moment when I am making business arrangements for which his signature is required. I told him about it two days ago; but, of course, my convenience counts for nothing when it is a question of going to some confounded steeplechase or other."

I thought there was nothing to be gained by putting off the evil moment. "I can't tell you where Bracknell is, Lord Staines," I replied; "but I have come here to give you some very unpleasant news about him. He was married yesterday at the Registrar's office at Stokingham to Hilda Turner."

Lord Staines started up, overturning his chair. A rush of blood made his

cheeks crimson for a moment, and then ebbed slowly away, leaving them of a chalky whiteness. For a full minute he uttered never a word; then he advanced slowly towards me from behind the table, trembling a good deal. "Maynard, my dear fellow," said he quite quietly, "it is not possible that you can be telling the truth. Somebody has played a foolish hoax upon you."

And when I shook my head, "My good sir," he went on, with rather more impatience, "I tell you that the thing is impossible! You will allow me to know something about my own son, I suppose. Bracknell is what you please—I never called him perfect, God knows!—but at least he is a man of honour. You don't seem to take in that no

honourable man could act in the way that you describe."

"It is not altogether unprecedented," I ventured to observe.

"I don't care whether it's unprecedented or not; Bracknell never did it. If he had been determined to marry this —this lady, he would have defied me and done it in the light of day, like a man, knowing very well what the consequences would be. But as for slinking off with her on the sly and betraying the confidence of his friend — pooh! don't tell me! If you brought the whole parish to swear to it, I wouldn't believe it."

I suppose he was really less incredulous than he professed to be, poor old fellow, for presently he added: "And pray,

where did you get this precious piece of information from?"

And then I told him the whole story. It was one of the most unpleasant things that I have ever had to do in my life, and when I had said my say I wanted to go away and leave him; but he held me back, gripping my arm tightly. So far he had listened to me quietly enough, scarcely interrupting me, and only once or twice muttering under his breath a word or two which I could not catch, but now on a sudden his anger burst forth in a storm of disjointed, incoherent sentences.

"I'll never see his face again—never! You may tell him so from me. He has chosen to take his own way, and by the Lord he shall have it! Not another

penny shall he have. I'll stop his allowance—a devilish handsome allowance too! —and his debts, which I've paid again and again, by George! without so much as grumbling—A fool and his money—but he'll find that I'm not quite the fool he takes me for. Damn it all, sir! did you come up here with the idea that you were going to talk me over? You have got up this scheme among you—you and that girl and old Turner, a man who owes everything to me, and thinks he can play me such a trick with impunity. But I'll very soon let him see his mistake. He shall resign the living, as sure as I stand here!"

"I think you forget, Lord Staines," I interrupted, "that I, at least, can have had no conceivable object in furthering

Hilda's schemes. If I had known anything about them, or had had any power over them, I should have done my best to put a stop to them for poor Jim Leigh's sake."

"Yes, yes—I know," he answered, with a complete change of tone. "I beg your pardon, Maynard; don't mind what I said about you; I didn't mean it. I mean what I say about Bracknell, though—I'll never speak to him again. Oh, Harry, that boy has broken my heart! He knew it was essential that he should marry money—and then to ruin himself for the sake of such a girl as that! You needn't pity Jim Leigh; he's well rid of a bad bargain."

Very likely he was, but unfortunately there was no likelihood at all that he

would take that view of the matter. I was beginning to say as much, but the words died away upon my lips; for at this moment the door was thrown open and Jim himself strode into the room. As soon as I saw his face I perceived that some one had been beforehand with me, and that there was no longer any occasion for me to consider in what words he might best be informed of Hilda's flight.

He glanced rapidly at each of us in turn. "It's true, then!" he exclaimed.

Lord Staines wheeled round upon him with an odd access of fury. "True!—yes, it's true enough. Why the devil shouldn't it be true? Did you make the mistake of supposing that my son was an honourable man? Why what a simpleton you must be! I—I——"

He stopped abruptly, stared at us for an instant with fixed glazing eyes, and then, swaying forwards, would have fallen on his face if Jim had not caught him.

Between us we lifted him on to a sofa, and then the servants were called, and poor little Lady Mildred had to be sent for. I told her in as few words as possible what was the cause of her father's seizure, thinking it best that she should know the truth; and, so far as I could judge, she was not very greatly surprised. She kept her presence of mind admirably, displaying no agitation and doing what little could be done until the doctor came.

Later in the day a great London man was telegraphed for; but our local practitioner confided to me that he would

not have considered this step necessary in the case of a patient of less exalted rank.

"Will he die, then?" I asked.

"Well, no," answered the doctor; "not this time. But he will never be the same again. I have told Lady Mildred that she may exercise her own judgment about telegraphing to Lord Bracknell, but that in my opinion he should not be allowed to see his father."

Jim and I left the house together. We had hardly exchanged a word as yet, and I did not like to begin; so that we walked in silence as far as the park gates, where our paths diverged; and there he came to a halt.

"Good-bye, Harry," said he; "I'm going away to-morrow."

"The best thing you can do," I answered.

"Is it? I don't know. Anyhow, I can't stay here. I shall go to India, or Australia, or somewhere—it doesn't much matter. Harry, you are right: this world is peopled by a set of rascals and liars."

I said the world was bad enough, but that I had not brought quite so sweeping a charge as that against it.

"Oh, I thought you had. One thing I know: I will never trust man or woman again as long as I live. But it won't bear talking about, and, after all, what's the good of talking? Good-bye, Harry."

He turned and walked away a few paces, then suddenly faced about and came back to me. "Some day or other we shall meet again, if I live," he said;

"but when that will be I can't tell. Don't forget me, old chap; I'll write to you when I can."

And so we parted. I confess that I did not take his words quite literally, and fully expected that he would be over at our house on the following day. But I was disappointed. He left England, just as he had said that he would do; Elmhurst was shut up; its owner was lost sight of, if not absolutely forgotten, by his many friends, and it was years before I saw his honest, kindly face again.

## CHAPTER VII.

THE hero of this narrative is, of course, Jim Leigh. It is true that Jim is not and never has been a particularly heroic personage; still, so far as writer and readers are concerned, he stands, for the time being, in that proud position, and must abide by the consequences of it. One of these is necessarily the occurrence of a considerable hiatus in the record of his career; for what is an unfortunate writer to do when his hero disappears into the interior of Abyssinia,

or the least frequented provinces of India, and will give no account of himself for months together? If I only knew something of the circumstances under which, during all those years, Jim slaughtered lions and tigers and elephants and bears in the happy hunting grounds of three continents, I should doubtless have many a thrilling adventure to chronicle; but I could never get anything but the most bald and meagre recital of his performances out of him; nor do I dare to draw upon my imagination, for my own sporting experiences do not extend beyond the shooting of partridges and pheasants, and even those I am very apt to miss, when flurried.

Unfortunately, too, Jim is one of the worst correspondents I have ever had to

deal with. I did indeed receive letters from him with tolerable regularity; but for any information of interest that they contained, they might as well have been written upon the back of a post-card. "It is awfully hot here, but I have got accustomed to it and don't mind. Yesterday we were very lucky, killing two fine tigers; but our average so far has been hardly up to the mark. . . . . The top of Mount Everest is 29,000 feet above the sea, which seems a lot. I wonder why they never taught us modern geography when we were boys. . . . . I find that there is nothing like cold tea for quenching the thirst." And so forth, and so forth. That is scarcely the kind of thing that one wants to hear from a man who has quitted his native land in

a state of bitter disenchantment and misanthropy, and who at the end of six years ought surely to be much better or much worse than when he started.

Jim never alluded to his misfortunes, nor made any inquiry as to the fate of those who had caused them. I generously gave him a few items of intelligence without having been asked; but he did not refer to them in his replies, and in like manner he ignored my representations that owners of landed property ought not to be absentees for an indefinite period. Once or twice he spoke vaguely of coming home, but something always occurred to make him postpone his return, until, as I have said, he had been wandering about the world for no less than six consecutive years.

In the course of that time we who remained in England had all grown six years older; it may be that some of us had grown a little wiser, though I am not sure of it; and some had grown, if not famous, at least notorious. As for me, I had fulfilled my tutor's negative prediction, and had not set the Thames on fire. Nevertheless, I had so far succeeded in my calling as to be always provided with a sufficiency of work, and remunerated by what I suppose I must call a sufficiency of pay. Also I had largely extended the circle of my acquaintance, and, during certain months of the year, went a good deal into society, where every now and then it was my great good fortune to meet with somebody who had never written a book

nor even contributed to a magazine. I have always found such persons exceptionally clever and entertaining, but they are becoming more and more rare, and will soon, I fear, be extinct. The others —the majority, I mean, who have at one time or another put their ideas into print —are given to making conversation dreary for a poor man who gets his living out of literature, and who would naturally rather talk about any other subject under the sun in play-hours.

Now it came to pass that one hot afternoon in the height of the London season I had returned to my chambers, physically and mentally exhausted, after an intellectual luncheon-party, and was saying to myself — with very great truth and justice — that of all forms of

social cruelty luncheon-parties are the most wantonly malignant, when a loud rat-tat, as from a heavy stick, made me glance at the door, through which, after an instant of delay, there strode into my presence a tall, broad-shouldered, bronzed individual, who had Jim Leigh's eyes and nose, surmounting a black moustache and beard entirely unknown to me. The nose, however, was enough to swear by; and I don't know when in the course of my life I have been more delighted to behold a familiar and prominent feature. I welcomed him with a warmth which I hope was as agreeable to him as it was sincere on my part, and he smiled all over his face, quite like the Jim of old; so that I freely forgave him his beard.

"And now that you have come back

at last, you mean to stay at home, like a respectable English country gentleman, I trust," said I, after I had made him comfortable with an arm-chair and a cigar, and something cold to drink.

"Well—I suppose so," he answered, with a shade of hesitation. "To tell you the truth, I'm utterly sick and tired of foreign lands, and I should like nothing better than to settle down at Elmhurst for the rest of my days."

"What should prevent you from doing as you like? You can't mean that you haven't got over the trouble that drove you away yet?" said I, for I thought we had better come to the point at once.

"I believe I have got over it, I don't know for certain," he answered slowly.

"Let us talk about something else. Tell me all about yourself."

So I told him all about myself, and his observations upon my literary achievements were flattering and discriminating, though I think he was a little bit nervous lest I should ask him whether he had read my works. Then we went on to speak of friends of former years.

"Poor old Lord Staines is still alive, I hear," he remarked.

"He is still alive," I replied, "and not likely to die, so far as I know; but you would hardly recognise him. On sunny mornings one meets him in a bath-chair in the park, with Lady Mildred walking beside him. He doesn't talk much nowadays, but he likes to see people, and he seems to be quite happy

when he is allowed to have his little grandson with him. I told you that he was reconciled with the Bracknells long ago."

Jim nodded. "And how do they get on?" he inquired, asking the question with something of an effort.

"Many people are curious to know," I answered. "That is, if you mean, how do they manage to pay their way? They are said to get on together rather indifferently. On the other hand, they have got on in society with a success which leaves nothing, or very little, to be desired. Lady Bracknell has climbed to the very top of the tree, and sits there in a graceful attitude to be gaped at by a multitude of admirers. She likes admiration, as you will remember, and

takes some pains to obtain it. She is very accessible, too, in spite of her brilliant position, and if you will go and call upon her in Wilton Place I am sure she will be glad to see you, and will begin exercising her fascinations upon you without loss of time."

"Don't!" said Jim.

But I went on all the same. "You had better call upon her; I don't think she will fascinate you, my dear Jim. Her hair has changed colour; it is a lovely bronze now, but her complexion requires no aid from art. She dresses exquisitely; she is addicted to private theatricals; and once or twice in the season she makes her father-in-law give a ball, and receives his guests for him, so that Lady Mildred may be free to

remain by his side, in case he should want anything. When he snubs her, as he does every now and again, she won't allow him to see little Lord Sunning for a day or two. That brings him to his bearings, and he has to go round to Wilton Place in his bath-chair and apologise."

"I don't want to hear about her," said Jim. He added presently: "I suppose you sometimes see Bracknell, don't you?"

I replied that I did. As a matter of fact, I had latterly been a good deal in Wilton Place, because I am credited with a certain facility for drilling amateur actors, and Lady Bracknell had found me useful in helping her to arrange the plays with which she was

wont to entertain distinguished audiences from time to time.

"I wonder," said Jim, "whether he ever feels sorry for having treated me as he did. We used to be friends, you know, and—and I don't think he can quite have realised what an injury he was doing me."

That seemed likely enough; but I was unable to say that I had observed any signs of an awakened conscience in Bracknell. "I know exactly what will happen," I remarked. "You will be as great friends as ever by the end of the week; and before a fortnight is over he will have borrowed a sum of money from you which may probably be represented by four figures. What is the use of your trying to bear malice, Jim?

You ought to have thrashed Bracknell six years ago. You could have thrashed him without any great difficulty; the process would have been consolatory to you and salutary to him. But instead of doing that, you chose to expend your wrath slowly upon unoffending lions and tigers, and the consequence is that you haven't a spark of it left for home consumption. You are dying to shake hands with your enemy now—you know you are."

"I don't know that I am particularly anxious to shake hands with him," said Jim consideringly. "I would rather not think of him as a traitor, that's all. You see, it does make a difference if a man says he is sorry."

I was beginning to point out that

expressions of sorrow must be taken for what they are worth, and that, although it may be right to pardon a man who has shamefully deceived you, it is extremely foolish to put faith in him again, when I was interrupted by the entrance of a second visitor, and who should this prove to be but Bracknell himself!

It was an odd coincidence that had brought him to my chambers on that afternoon of all others; for he had never so far honoured me before; but he had evidently not come with any idea of meeting Jim, whom he glanced at with an impatient frown and did not recognise. Jim was certainly altered, but Bracknell was perhaps even more so. He had lost his good looks to a great extent, and

carried more superfluous flesh than he was entitled to at his age. His constitution was a fine one, but I believe he mixed his liquors in an appalling manner, and one can't sit up all night and every night, playing cards, without exhibiting traces of fatigue.

Jim stared at him in a sort of consternation; no doubt the change in his former friend was more apparent to him than it was to me. As he did not see fit to declare himself, the duty of making him known devolved upon me, and I watched with some interest the demeanour of the two men who were thus unexpectedly brought face to face once more. Jim got up slowly, looking very grave, and said, "How do you do, Bracknell?" But Bracknell burst into

a laugh, and seized his old schoolfellow by the hand.

"Jim Leigh, as I'm a living sinner!" he exclaimed. "Dear old Jim! Where on earth have you been concealing yourself for the last hundred years? Didn't somebody tell me you were going in for big game in Central Africa or somewhere? I wish I had been with you! Let me know when you start off again, and I'll see if I can't get out of this for a few months. By Jove! what a relief it would be!"

It was so evident that he had completely forgotten the trifling circumstance of his having once robbed Jim of a wife that I was shaken by internal laughter, and had to turn away to conceal my emotion; but Jim, I dare say,

saw nothing to laugh at in such callousness.

"I don't think I am likely to be making any more expeditions of the kind yet awhile," he answered coldly. "I have stayed away from England too long as it is."

"Have you?" said Bracknell, whose attention was already beginning to wander. "Well, I don't know; England's a beastly country to live in, unless one has about thirty thousand a year, clear. You don't mind my smoking, do you, Maynard?"

I said I did not; and he added, lowering his voice slightly, "I want just to have a word or two with you presently, if you're not busy."

Jim took this rather broad hint, and put on his hat. After I had ascertained

his address, and had arranged a meeting with him for the following day, he turned to go; but Bracknell, starting out of a fit of abstraction, caught him suddenly by the elbow with renewed cordiality.

"Going to stay in London for a bit?" he asked. "You must look us up in Wilton Place, old chap. You know my wife?"

"I had the pleasure of being rather intimately acquainted with Lady Bracknell some years ago," replied Jim grimly.

"Oh yes, of course. Well, she'll be very glad to see you again. Come and dine with us some evening. I expect we're pretty deeply engaged just now, but I'll drop you a line."

When Jim had departed, I could not

help remarking, "It must be very convenient to have such a bad memory as yours!"

Bracknell was apparently preoccupied. "Bad memory? How do you mean?" he asked. "Oh, I see! But it would be more to the purpose to pity Leigh for having such a confoundedly good one, wouldn't it? He looked as sulky as a bear. I say, Maynard, will you do me a small favour?"

"That depends upon what it may be," I answered.

"Oh, it isn't much of a one. You know the editor of the *Piccadilly Gazette*, don't you? Well, just run your eye over this paragraph that he has put into his scurrilous paper."

He drew a newspaper from his pocket

and pointed to the following oracular announcement :

"A certain noble earl is not quite so enfeebled in intelligence as is sometimes supposed. Not satisfied with knowing that his son is heir-presumptive to a vast estate, he is moving heaven and earth to get his daughter married to the present holder thereof : so that, in case of the advent of an heir-apparent upon the scene, the property may at least remain in the family. And yet the heir-presumptive is not happy they say."

"I don't want Alf Beauchamp to read that sort of thing, you know," said Bracknell.

"I can well believe that you don't," I answered ; "but how do you propose

to prevent him from reading it, since it is already in print?"

"Oh, that's nothing. Very likely he won't see it; and if he does see it, the odds are that he won't understand. What I want is to stop this newspaper brute from speaking more plainly. You might be a good fellow and manage it for me. Tell him we'll invite him to dinner if he likes, and if that won't do, find out what will do. I suppose he has his price."

"Very likely he has," I answered, "and I am much flattered by your intrusting me with this delicate mission. But I am like the editor—I demand my *quid pro quo*, and if I do this for you, you will have to do something for me."

"With all the pleasure in life; but it

isn't much that I can do for any man, except ask him to dinner."

"You can do a little more for Jim Leigh, whom I think you will admit that you have treated rather badly. First of all, you can beg his pardon. Is that too bitter a pill for you to swallow?"

"Oh, I'll beg his pardon, if it will make him any happier," answered Bracknell laughing.

"Secondly, you must promise that you will neither ask him to play cards with you, nor borrow money of him."

Bracknell opened his eyes. "Do you know, Maynard," said he, "that that is not very far removed from being an impertinent request?"

I replied that I might have said much the same thing of the request which he

had addressed to me. Anyhow, I must have his promise, or I should not go to the office of the *Piccadilly Gazette*.

So he laughed again and gave the required pledge, and went his way, leaving me somewhat reassured as to Jim's future. Lady Bracknell, I knew, would try to make him fall in love with her again; but I was not much afraid of her succeeding. Clever as she was, she was not quite clever enough to understand that the surest way of disgusting Jim would be to show him that she was no more true to the husband whom she had chosen than she had been in days gone by to himself.

## CHAPTER VIII.

One morning not long after this, Jim did me the honour to breakfast with me, and gave me an account of his first interview with Lady Bracknell, which amused me very much and contrasted favourably in point of style with his epistolary efforts.

"I thought," said he, "that I had better call and get it over; so I went to Wilton Place about six o'clock in the afternoon, hoping that she would be in the Park and that I might leave my

card and retire. But as she was at home, I had to march into the drawing-room, feeling a little shy and awkward, don't you know, as one does after spending such a long time out of reach of civilisation. I dare say I got rather red in the face, and I was horribly conscious that my boots squeaked. There were a lot of men in the room, young fellows with bouquets in their button-holes and very high collars—I hear you call them 'mashers' nowadays—and they all opened their eyes and mouths at me, which was like their impudence. I confess that they made me uncomfortable at first; but after a bit I recollected that if I had ordered the eldest of them to run up to the Brocas for me eight or nine years ago he would have put his

best leg foremost, and that set me more at my ease. Besides, I almost forgot them from the moment that Hilda began to talk to me. My dear Harry, what an extraordinary — what a miraculous change! You never prepared me for anything of the sort."

"I told you that her hair had become debased from gold to copper," I remarked. "If I didn't prepare you for any more startling change, it was because I must own that I can't detect any."

"Can't detect any! Do you mean to tell me that Lady Bracknell is the same woman as Hilda Turner? Oh, I know what you are grinning at; you think the change is in me and that there never was really any such person as the Hilda

whom I was in love with. Perhaps you are right; but for all that, she has transformed herself into something very unlike what she used to be. She doesn't look a day older, and speaking impartially—as I can now—I should say that she is prettier, if anything; but oh, dear! I didn't like her ways of going on at all. She is quite the modern great lady; she has all the fashionable slang at the tip of her tongue; and she said things which—which—well, I hate to hear ladies say such things. And it struck me that the mashers were anything but respectful to her. As I listened to her, I wondered how I could ever have been such an idiot—but no matter! You said she wouldn't fascinate me, and most certainly she didn't.

I am quite cured, Harry, and I suppose I ought to be very glad, but when one has nursed a complaint for years it makes one feel rather queer to lose it all of a sudden. The sensation is something like having a double tooth out. It's a good riddance, of course ; but it seems to leave an enormous gap behind it. Well, those young swells took themselves off, one by one, until she and I were left alone, and then—do you know what she did then ? "

"To be sure I do," I replied. "She drew her chair close up to yours, put her head a little on one side, gazed pensively at you, and presently gave you to understand that you were the only man whom she had ever loved with pure affection."

"Oh, no; she didn't go quite that length; though I must say—However, perhaps I ought not to tell you."

"I do not see the use of having a tried and trusted friend if he is not to be let into your confidence. I think you decidedly ought to tell me what she did," said I. For I wanted to know.

"Well," Jim continued, "she began by abusing Bracknell—said he was a drunkard and a spendthrift, and that he ill-treated her, and I don't know what all. Fancy a woman speaking about her husband like that!"

Evidently this was a new and distasteful experience to Jim. "Perhaps it was true, though," I suggested.

"If it was, she ought to have been

the last person to say so," returned that hard-hearted Jim. "But, between ourselves, I don't believe it was true. She has told me untruths before now, and why shouldn't she tell them again? I tried to stop her; but it wasn't a bit of good. She went on about her marriage having been a mistake and about her having been drawn into it and having repented when it was too late, and so forth. Do you suppose she says that sort of thing to everybody?"

I replied that I really didn't know; but that probably she endeavoured to suit her conversation to her auditor.

"Her conversation didn't suit *me*, at all events," returned Jim emphatically. And then he told me how Bracknell had begged his pardon in a very frank and

manly way for the wrong that he had done him six years before.

"I went to call at Portman Square the next day," he continued. "Poor old Lord Staines was always kind to me when I was a boy, and I think it amused him to hear all about my adventures. He wanted to know whether I had seen little Sunning yet, and began to brag about the boy and his pluck and his beauty very much as he used to brag about Bracknell long ago. Poor old fellow! it was rather sad to hear him. He said, 'I hope you and Bracknell have made it up,' and when I told him that we had, he muttered, 'That's right —that's right. Old friends oughtn't to quarrel about a woman. Women aren't worth quarrelling about.' After which,

he pushed his chair back and made a little bow to Lady Mildred. 'I don't mean you, my dear,' he said; 'you're worth your weight in gold, as everybody knows.' I remember your mother used always to be telling me that Lady Mildred was perfection, but somehow I never noticed in those days how pretty she was. I suppose I had only eyes for one person then. Ah, well! times are changed. I'd very much rather talk to Lady Mildred than to Lady Bracknell now. I had a long chat with her while her father dozed over the newspaper. It was pleasant to find that she hadn't forgotten me at all, though she said she would hardly have known me with my beard, which she didn't consider an improvement."

"Is that why you have shaved it off?" I inquired; for indeed Jim's long, thin face had been deprived of that ornament.

"Oh, well, one doesn't want to look more like a backwoodsman than one can help, you know," he answered. "As I was saying, Lady Mildred and I had a good talk and discussed you all and enjoyed ourselves very much, until one of Lady Bracknell's mashers came in and interrupted us. A fellow called Beauchamp—do you know anything of him?"

"Alfred Beauchamp," I replied, "is a young man whom everybody knows something about, by reason of his being quite in the front rank of eligible bachelors. His rent-roll is said to exceed forty thousand a year; also he has coal-mines which, I believe, are expected to

go on increasing in value. He is the only surviving son of the late Lady Staines's brother, and in the event of his dying without issue, the whole of his property would pass to Bracknell. As it would be dangerous to count upon his doing anything so obliging as that, the family have decided to marry him to Lady Mildred; only I imagine that they haven't ventured to tell him so, because, of course, he is his own master, and he might insist upon his right to choose a wife for himself. Did Lady Mildred receive him well?"

"I don't know what you call receiving him well," answered Jim, looking a little displeased. "She was civil to him; but I didn't stay long after he came in. I must say that he struck me as being

rather a young fool and certainly not good enough for her. Do you suppose that she *wants* to marry him?"

"Lady Mildred is a dutiful daughter," I replied, "and Lord Staines is notoriously in embarrassed circumstances. I can't say for certain what she may want, but I think I can form a pretty shrewd guess at what she will have to do. She is not so very much to be pitied, after all. There are very few girls in London who would refuse Alfred Beauchamp, I can tell you."

"Ah, you're just what you used to be!" exclaimed Jim impatiently. "Why should you always take such a delight in representing that everybody is selfish and sordid?"

I pointed out that I had made no such

general arraignment and that, so far as Lady Mildred was concerned, I had meant to imply that, if she married her cousin, she would probably do so from motives of filial and disinterested affection; but Jim did not seem disposed to listen to me.

"I dare say you know more about it than I do," he interrupted. "Anyhow, it's no business of mine."

I did not tell him that I had reason to doubt whether poor Lady Mildred would be happy with Beauchamp. My mother still maintained that the girl's heart had been given past recalling to Jim; but it would have been a pity to hint at such a state of things; because he was evidently a little smitten with her, and it was quite certain that she could

not now accept him, whether he wore a beard or not. So I agreed with him that these projected marriages in high life did not concern humble individuals like ourselves, and suggested, by way of changing the subject, that we should drive up to Lord's to see the Eton and Harrow match, as we had previously arranged to do.

Nothing is more futile and foolish than to say "Matters used to be better managed in old days." Such assertions are never believed, and are tolerably sure either to give offence or to provoke covert sneers. At the same time, I should think that there can be few admirers of the present so infatuated as to deny that Lord's on the Eton and Harrow match-day has suffered a change

for the worse. It is no longer the pleasant meeting-place that it once was; it is frequented by a vast concourse of people who care neither for Eton, nor for Harrow, nor for cricket; and as for chancing unexpectedly upon an old schoolfellow, you have a far better chance of doing that in Pall Mall or St. James's Street than in the midst of such a rabble. Jim and I threaded our way, grumbling, through the deep fringe of spectators, whose persons and vehicles effectually prevented us from catching a glimpse of the game, and, having been provided with tickets by a member, were about to turn these to account when we were arrested by hearing our names called out in a high, clear voice which was familiar to both of us. From the

open carriage in which she was sitting, surrounded, as usual, by fashionable youths, Lady Bracknell beckoned to us to approach, and we could not do otherwise than obey her orders. Her ladyship was clad in Eton blue from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, and very becoming the colour was to her. She attacked Jim at once.

"Come and talk to me," she said; "I have a thousand things to ask you. You don't want to look at that stupid cricket, do you?"

Jim, with a self-assertion for which I should not have given him credit, replied, "Well, I came here for that purpose." But probably the reluctance of the fly acts as an agreeable stimulus upon the spider.

"You shall go and look at it presently," Hilda said, and signed to him to get into the carriage beside her.

So I left them together and strolled on, feeling truly sorry for poor Jim, because I am sure that it must be a most unpleasant thing to be obliged to talk to a woman with whom you have once been madly in love and whom you love no longer.

I had not proceeded very far before I came upon the Staines party—old Lord Staines lying back in his carriage, propped up by cushions which kept slipping down and demanded careful watching on the part of Lady Mildred; little Lord Sunning, standing upon his grandfather's knee to get a better view of the game; and Alfred Beauchamp,

leaning over the carriage door, and blowing cigarette-smoke into his cousin's face.

I stopped to speak to them, and Lord Staines said, "So your friend Leigh is back again at last, is he?—back at last, eh? Stupid fellow! if he had stayed at home, he'd have got over his disappointment sooner, and thanked Heaven for it. I see more than that young woman fancies—more than she fancies by a long way."

The old gentleman had contracted a disquieting habit of thinking aloud. He went on muttering to himself now, and I dare say that if his remarks had been audible, they would have been found to be uncomplimentary to his daughter-in-law, whom he detested; but who, never-

theless, had reduced him to a state of tolerably complete subjection.

Lady Mildred looked a little nervous, I thought, and went on talking very fast to Beauchamp, a fair-complexioned young man, whose conversational powers were not brilliant, yet who was by no means such a fool as Jim had hastily assumed him to be. It struck me that he was bringing his mind to bear upon the thought that it might be a good thing if he were to marry his cousin, and that he was succeeding very fairly well.

However, his attentions, if such they were, were soon interrupted. Little Sunning, who was rather a friend of mine, had clambered from his grandfather's knee on to my shoulder, and

had just dealt a resounding blow upon the top of my hat, by way of applause to a retiring batsman, when a vision of sky-blue flitted before my eyes, and a high-pitched voice (I forget whether I have mentioned that Hilda's voice had a metallic ring which no effort on her part availed to soften) said: "You are a nice sort of person to make appointments with, Mr. Beauchamp! May I ask whether you remember begging me to bring you here to-day? And are you aware that I kept the carriage waiting for you three quarters of an hour?"

And then I heard Beauchamp murmuring excuses from the background. "By Jove! Lady Bracknell, I'm so awfully sorry. What an idiot I am! Can't think how I came to forget it!"

There was an indistinct rejoinder, followed by a gradual dying away of both voices, from which I concluded that her ladyship had taken the young man by the ear and led him off. Having persuaded Sunning that he would be more comfortable, and that I should be cooler, if he got up onto the box, and having thus regained the power of turning my head round, I perceived that Jim had taken Beauchamp's place, and was conversing with Lady Mildred, whose eyes had grown perceptibly brighter during the last few minutes. She certainly looked very pretty in her white dress, and I could not wonder at the satisfaction which Jim obviously derived from gazing at her, but it was unlucky, to say the least of it, that he should have taken such a

long time to discover her beauty. Six years before, when Alfred Beauchamp had had a father and an elder brother living, there might have been some hope for him; but his chance was now represented by a zero of a type so clear that one could only hope he might be enough of a reasonable being to see it. Reasonableness, however, was not his distinguishing characteristic.

Presently Bracknell made his way to the carriage and mounted the box beside his son. He took no notice of us, but hoisted the boy upon his knee, and they two became absorbed in contemplation of the game, the elder making occasional explanations to the younger which were listened to with interest and respect. I suppose paternal fondness, must

have been hereditary in the Henley family, for Bracknell was not one whit less foolishly devoted to his boy than his father had been to him in days of yore, and, to all appearance, was bent upon reproducing a system of treatment which had not been conspicuously successful in his own case. The child had Bracknell's dark hair and grey eyes. I could discern no resemblance to his mother in him, nor, in truth, did that strain of blood seem likely to infuse any fresh qualities of a valuable nature into the race.

While I was watching the representatives of three generations, Lady Bracknell and Beauchamp strolled by. The lady was talking with a good deal of animation, and the gentleman wore

the air of one who is at once fascinated and puzzled. Bewilderment at the proceedings of Lady Bracknell was not, apparently, confined to him, for Lord Staines, following the pair with his eyes, muttered quite audibly:

"I do wonder what infernal mischief that woman is up to now! Is it only spite, or is it a plot? And if it's a plot, what the deuce is the object of it, you know?"

Bracknell looked down from the box and laughed. "Well, Maynard," said he, "why are you looking so solemn? Taking notes, as usual? It seems to me that you have all the elements of a sensational romance ready to your hand here. There are bound to be some strong situations before long, I should

say, and you had better try to be on the spot when they come off!"

"And what is the *dénoûment* to be?" I made so bold as to inquire.

"Oh, don't ask me," he returned. "*I* don't know; and, between you and me, I doubt very much whether anybody else does either. All I can see is that there will be a row soon."

"What's that you say?" broke in Lord Staines querulously. "Why should there be a row? nonsense about a row! I wish to heaven, Bracknell, that you could induce your wife to let me manage my own affairs in my own way!"

"I wish I could," returned Bracknell, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I wish I could induce her to let me manage *my* affairs in my own way. But I can't, you see."

## CHAPTER IX.

If Lady Bracknell's motives for luring Beauchamp away from her sister-in-law's side were obscure to Lord Staines, they did not to a reflective person appear quite unfathomable. When only one life intervenes between your husband and a large property, it must, no doubt, seem deplorable that that life should be supplemented by others, and I can well believe that to see Beauchamp married would have gone to Hilda's heart, even though he should select as his wife a member

of her husband's family. It is true that she can hardly have hoped to keep him permanently single, but she may have taken into consideration that existence is precarious, and that young men addicted to field sports run frequent risks of breaking their necks. Add to this she did not love Lord Staines, while she detested Lady Mildred with the intensity of an impostor who has been found out, and you have an explanation of her conduct which is at least plausible. I don't say that it is the true explanation, because I cannot pretend to be able to follow all the tortuous workings of such a mind as Hilda's; but that the course which events subsequently took was premeditated and contrived by her in cold blood seems to me too vio-

lent an hypothesis. In any case, there could be no question as to the fact that she had marked Beauchamp down as her prey, nor did she fail to capture him. The truth is that she very rarely failed in enterprises of that kind. She had no remarkable personal advantages, yet the men whom she wished to adore her almost invariably ended by adoring her. Of the methods which she employed in order to achieve the desired end I have excellent reasons for being ignorant. I suppose that if by an impossibility she had ever thought it worth her while to captivate me, I should have succumbed like the others; but she never did think it worth her while, and therefore I have never ceased to wonder at the ease with which her victims were gained.

Beauchamp gave no trouble at all. He surrendered unconditionally at the first blow, and spent the remainder of the London season upon his knees, metaphorically speaking. I used to meet him and his enchantress pretty frequently at balls and crushes, and always watched them with interest. Other people watched them too, making such spiteful, ironical, or condemnatory comments upon the proceedings of the pair as were prompted by their several dispositions and by the nature of the case: but by the persons who have been introduced into this history it so chanced that they were little remarked. Lady Mildred, who was in constant attendance upon her father, went very seldom into society; Bracknell had of late years ceased to frequent

the circles which, as a bachelor, he had so conspicuously adorned; and those of Jim's friends who had not forgotten him during his long absence belonged for the most part to his own sex, and were not in the habit of giving balls. Thus Lady Bracknell was able to carry out her designs unmolested; and as Beauchamp continued to pay visits to Portman Square with unfailing regularity, any anxiety that Lord Staines may have felt on the day of the cricket-match was probably soon allayed.

Sunning, to be sure, very nearly let the cat out of the bag one afternoon when Jim and I called at his grandfather's house. We found him and the old gentleman with a tea-table between them, busily engaged in eating hot

buttered toast. Lady Mildred was pouring out the tea, and Beauchamp, reclining in an arm-chair, looked very much as if he was wondering how soon he might venture to go away.

"I do think it is very dangerous," Lady Mildred was saying as we entered; and after she had shaken hands with us she appealed for support to Jim. "Mr. Leigh, do you think it is safe for such a mite as Sunning to ride in the Row with nobody but a groom to look after him? And he always makes the groom ride a hundred yards behind."

"From what I have seen of the equestrian performances in the Row, I don't think it is an over and above safe place for anybody to ride in," answered Jim laughing.

"But seriously," persisted Lady Mildred, "I don't like to think of that child in the thick of such a crowd. He has one of those wicked little Shetland ponies, too, which might overpower him at any moment."

Sunning, with his mouth full of buttered toast, was understood to say that he would like to see the pony that could overpower him.

Lord Staines chuckled. "He can take care of himself—trust him! All the same, I think Bracknell might go out with the boy."

Sunning, having swallowed his toast, informed us that his father never rode in London. "And I mustn't ride with mother when *he's* there," he added, pointing a greasy forefinger at Beauchamp.

"Eh?—what?—who?" ejaculated Lord Staines, pricking up his ears.

And Sunning did not mend matters by continuing, in his lisping, childish treble, "Before he came there was another genkleman, but I think he's gone away now. Mother says not to ride with her when there's a genkleman."

"Would he be so very much in your way?" asked Lady Mildred, turning to Beauchamp, with just the faintest touch of disdain in her voice.

"Not the least in the world," answered the young man. "I am very sorry if I have prevented Lady Bracknell from taking him out, and next time—if there is a next time—I'll make a point of requesting the favour of his company.

But really, I don't ride with Lady Bracknell very often."

"Evely day," said the relentless Sunning emphatically.

This was a little embarrassing, but Beauchamp, though young, was a man of experience, and his serenity was not easily disturbed. "You don't mean to say so!" he exclaimed. "I'm very much ashamed of myself, and I'll apologise to Lady Bracknell the next time I see her. But that is just the sort of stupid thing that I am always doing. She good-naturedly asked me to ride with her one day, and I suppose I must have kept on going ever since from force of habit. I'll tie a knot in my pocket handkerchief at once, so that I may remember to forget to go to-morrow."

I don't know whether he was only anxious to stifle suspicion, or whether he still contemplated the possibility of an ultimate union with Lady Mildred; but he made great efforts to be agreeable to her during the next quarter of an hour, and when he took his leave Lord Staines, who had evidently been alarmed for a moment, seemed to be quite reassured.

Jim, after we had left the house together, informed me casually that he considered the manners and customs of savages very superior upon the whole, to those of so-called civilised Christians, but declined to enter more fully into the subject, when invited to do so. "It doesn't matter; only that's my opinion," he said.

I am not acquainted with the customs

of savages, except by hearsay; but our own, I freely admit, might be improved upon. One very tiresome custom, which, I fear, has become almost endemic among us of late, is that of entertaining long-suffering spectators with *tableaux vivants*. No one who has not been concerned in the getting up of one of these exhibitions can have any idea of the worry and trouble that they entail, though a good many people must be acquainted with the tedium of witnessing them when got up. Still, since they are the fashion, there is of course nothing for it but to submit to them; and Lady Bracknell, who, as I have already mentioned, was dramatically disposed, must needs have her *tableaux*, like everybody else. No part in them was assigned to me;

because, as she informed me, with that laughing candour which, for some reason or other, plain people are supposed not to mind, I really was not good-looking enough ; but I was allowed the privilege of assisting in the formation of the groups. Beauchamp, it must be assumed, possessed the qualification which Nature had denied to me ; for it was at once decided that he should have the honour of figuring in the only *tableau* of the evening which his hostess proposed to grace personally ; that, namely, in which her ladyship, as Andromeda, with her beautiful bare arms chained above her head and her bronze hair rippling down over her shoulders, was rescued from destruction by a very Saxon-looking Perseus. I ventured to suggest that Bracknell might represent

the monster, but this was considered to be a proposition of doubtful taste, and as no one else volunteered to undertake that ungrateful part, we had to have an appalling creature constructed out of inanimate materials for the occasion.

If only it had been permissible to make use of an inanimate Perseus into the bargain, I should have been spared much mental wear and tear and a grievous waste of time; for Beauchamp declared that he was physically incapable of standing on one leg for sixty consecutive seconds, and it was obvious that unless he stood upon one leg he would spoil the whole thing. I had to put him through a complete course of gymnastics, and even then it was only by the most diligent punching and kneading that I

could force him into an attitude which was not positively grotesque. Whenever I left his side he, so to speak, tumbled to pieces instantly. However, in the long run we achieved as near an approach to success as could be expected, and when the representation came off, this *tableau* was received with tremendous applause. I imagine that the majority of the spectators were lost in admiration of Andromeda's arms and shoulders and had no eyes for poor Perseus, who wobbled perceptibly.

Nevertheless, there were found persons to notice and remark upon Perseus too, if not exactly to admire him; and it chanced that, on the fall of the curtain, I was standing within earshot of one of these. She was an elderly lady, blessed

with three marriageable daughters, and in that capacity naturally opposed to the goings on of unscrupulous young matrons such as Lady Bracknell.

"It really is a little too bad," she said to her neighbour; "and I wonder that Lord Bracknell allows it. Of course we know that he is not over-particular, and, as far as that goes, I dare say his own manner of life doesn't give him the right to be so, but I should have thought that even he would have seen how outrageous this kind of thing is, considering that Mr. Beauchamp is as good as engaged to his sister. Under the circumstances it's almost indecent."

I was having a little inward laugh at the "almost" in the above outburst of virtuous indignation when I became aware

that some one besides myself had overheard it. Leaning against the wall behind me, was Bracknell, who had not thought it necessary to be at home in time to receive his wife's guests, but had now come in—probably from his club. From the scowl upon his brow I concluded that he had been losing money; from the brightness of his eyes I feared that he had been drinking; and from the murderous glance which he shot at the dowager whose speech I have quoted I gathered that her unvarnished strictures were not agreeable to him. He muttered a word or two under his breath and turned away, leaving me in some doubt as to whether he was incensed against his wife or against her critic. But very shortly afterwards all uncer-

tainty as to that point was removed from my mind.

I had been invited to remain for a quiet supper after the departure of the general company. Beauchamp and a few others who had been similarly favoured had already gone down to the dining-room, and I was lingering on the deserted stage with the fair Andromeda, when Bracknell suddenly entered and strode towards us. He either did not notice my presenee or was indifferent to it.

"Hilda," he said, "you will oblige me by dropping this; it has gone far enough. You think yourself very clever, no doubt; but it strikes me that you are in danger of being a little too clever, for once."

She turned slowly and surveyed him with calm contempt. "Had you not

better go to bed?" she asked. "Perhaps you may be in a state to explain yourself in the morning."

Bracknell had the family temper and I thought for a moment that he was going to treat us to a display of it; but possibly he may have learnt by experience that storming at his wife was a thankless task. "I am sober enough now," he returned quietly, "to tell you that I don't choose to have Mildred's marriage put a stop to for your gratification. How long do you flatter yourself that that young fool is going to trot about after you, like a lap-dog? Till this time next year? And what do you suppose will happen when you begin to bore him? You do begin to bore people after a certain time, I can assure you."

"I dare say that is quite true," replied Hilda meekly; "you ought to know. Of course I will obey you to the best of my ability; but I am afraid I can no more force Mr. Beauchamp to marry your sister than I can prevent you from insulting me before a third person."

At this juncture the third person executed a strategic movement in the direction of the door. But Bracknell intercepted me.

"You needn't withdraw, Maynard," said he with a short laugh. "I've nothing more to say, and now we may as well go down and have some supper. I don't often interfere with her ladyship's little games, but I believe she knows that when I do, she must give them up."

I observed, however, a slight smile upon her ladyship's lips which convinced me that, in this instance, she had no intention at all of giving up her little game.

END OF VOL. I.

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